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**HANDS OFF
BULLDOG DRUMMOND!**

.

THE "BULLDOG DRUMMOND" BOOKS

By Sapper

BULLDOG DRUMMOND
THE BLACK GANG
THE THIRD ROUND
THE FINAL COUNT
TEMPLE TOWER
KNOCK-OUT
CHALLENGE
THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES
BULLDOG DRUMMOND AT BAY
THE RETURN OF BULLDOG DRUMMOND

By Sapper and Gerard Fairlie

BULLDOG DRUMMOND ON DARTMOOR

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BULLDOG DRUMMOND ATTACKS
CAPTAIN BULLDOG DRUMMOND
BULLDOG DRUMMOND STANDS FAST
HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND!

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THE MAN WHO LAUGHED
THE EXQUISITE LADY
UNFAIR LADY
BIRDS OF PREY
THE MUSTER OF THE VULTURES
SUSPECT
THE MAN WITH TALENT
THE ROPE THAT HANGS
THEY FOUND EACH OTHER

HANDS OFF
Bulldog Drummond !

by

GERARD FAIRLIE

following.

SAPPER



London

HODDER & STOUGHTON

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*The characters in this book are
entirely imaginary and have no
relation to any living person.*

FIRST EDITION . . . APRIL, 1949

*Made and Printed in Great Britain for Hodder & Stoughton, Limited, London,
by Wyman & Sons Limited, London, Reading and Fakenham*

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1: IN WHICH A DISCUSSION IS INTERRUPTED

"I MUST say," said Algy Longworth morosely, "I am compelled to state that the English scene is changing. Has altered, in fact. Falling off. I mean to say, deteriorating. . . ."

"Stop talking like a thesaurus," said Peter Darrell.

Longworth glanced at his friend with suspicion. Of course, there might be such a word, and it was just possible that it meant something: Darrell had recently become addicted to looking up strange sounds in the dictionary, and alarming his acquaintances with their unexpected use. But he occasionally threw in an unspellable bait, and Longworth was still smarting from the last time he had been caught. He decided that it would be wiser to ignore the fearsome word.

"Well, I mean to say . . . it is, isn't it?"

"What?" asked Peter Darrell bluntly.

"The English scene," explained Longworth.

"Is what?"

"Changing," said Longworth, and added: "For the worse."

"Exactly what do you call the English scene?"

Algy Longworth considered the point. It had not been his intention, when he had launched the subject, to go too deeply into anything so serious: Longworth found anything serious simply failed to hold his attention. It got too involved, too difficult. And after all, what were experts for except to deal with things like that. But this was a challenge: Darrell simply could not be allowed to get away with an attitude which was nothing more or less than smug superiority. At least, it looked like that . . . thesaurus, indeed!

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"Well," said Longworth, with masterly strategy, "what do you?"

"Lords," said Peter Darrell promptly. "Middlesex at the crease, and Yorkshire in the field. Last over of extra time, last two men in, one run to win. Everybody congealing everywhere, including the umpires. The scene changes to winter. Fade out to Wembley. The centre-forward has swept through the defence: the opposing centre-half and both backs are appealing from the ground . . ."

"Why?"

"Off-side: it always is. But the centre-forward goes on, ball at his toes, and the referee waves him on. Out comes the goalkeeper to meet him, the forward shoots, a great shout comes from the ninety thousand fans . . . switch to that night in the local pub, where they're mixing everything. . . ."

"Was it a goal?" asked Longworth anxiously.

"No," said Darrell.

"Why not?"

"Just one of those things. He should have scored, of course. Perhaps he hadn't the temperament for the big occasion."

"Perhaps," suggested Longworth hopefully, "it wasn't his fault. Perhaps the goalkeeper saved brilliantly with the tips of his fingers."

"Yes," said Darrell. "But perhaps not."

"Perhaps," agreed Longworth reluctantly.

"That," stated Darrell, "is the English scene. I don't see that it has deteriorated. People are still getting centuries and ducks, maidens and hat-tricks. Others are getting goals and giving away penalties. You make me tired. . . ."

"I don't!" denied Longworth quickly. "The English scene does. Make you tired, I mean." He paused, and then added magnanimously. "It makes me tired too. . . ."

Darrell sighed.

"Exactly how?"

Algy Longworth was now fervently wishing that he had never thought of the English scene. The expression was fast becoming distasteful to him, specially with his friend Peter Darrell in his present mood. To be pinned down, decided Algy Longworth, is an awkward sort of conversation.

However, he must be on his mettle. You simply can't, he told himself, let Peter get away with this sort of thing. The fellow must have been eating brains for lunch: he's miles too high this afternoon. . . .

"The English scene," began Algy Longworth, slowly and distinctly, "does not quite mean to me what you've described. Of course that's all part of the whole, but by itself it isn't the complete English scene. Now, take a street . . ."

"Pall Mall."

"Eh?" said Longworth, opening his eyes. He did not welcome interruption when he was bent on concentration.

"You said take a street."

"Yes."

"I took one."

"Pall Mall?"

"Pall Mall. A handsome street."

"True!" said Longworth, warming up again. "But handsome is as handsome does, or something like that. Pall Mall was handsome, in the old days when it was full of thirsty chaps hurrying to their clubs for the morning snifter, or the afternoon snoot, or the evening snort. What do they do now? Droop along as fast as their diminished calories will let them, anxiously hoping to goodness that they'll make it before the watered gin runs out. Depressed, they are. Mortified. Frustrated to one bottle a month, occasionally. That's the English scene. . . ."

"Good God !" said Darrell, abruptly sitting up.

Algvy Longworth was pleased. He could forgive this interruption ; he opened his eyes the better to see the gratifying result of his eloquence on his friend. But Peter Darrell was plainly paying no attention to him : he was sitting bolt upright in his chair, staring out of the large window into Pall Mall beyond.

There is one great disadvantage to the comfortable chairs supplied in most British social clubs : they are extremely difficult to get out of at any speed. Longworth, who could on occasion move with rapidity, uncoiled his long body with surprising agility, and was up by the window in a very short space of time. But he only saw the end of the scene which had so riveted the attention of Peter Darrell. A man seemed to make a dive for the pavement, as a great black saloon car swerved dangerously towards him, and landed flat on his face as the car mounted the kerb for a moment, and then accelerated smartly away.

"Take his number !" snapped Darrell.

The car swept up Pall Mall into St. James's Square as he spoke.

"Sorry !" said Longworth. "Missed it ! That taxi got in the way !"

"I only got the letters," confessed Darrell in a disappointed voice : he was now standing beside Longworth at the window. "CPN. But I'll bet the last number was three. The swine, driving on like that !"

"What did he do ?"

"Looked as if he was doing his best to run that fellow down : must have completely lost control, or his head, or something."

"I say !" said Longworth. "That near-victim looks pretty dicky to me. Shouldn't we rally round ? He might be grateful for a bracer. . . ."

"Good idea," agreed Darrell.

He led the way from the smoking-room, closely followed by Longworth, down the few stairs and through the hall to the street below. As they emerged, they saw a few people gathering round a well-dressed, pleasant-faced young man who had just picked himself up, rather stiffly, from the pavement. When they reached the small group, the young man had just started to speak.

"It's quite all right!" he was saying, manfully brushing the dust from his clothes with his hands. "I'm all right . . . really!"

But, somehow, his tone did not convince either Darrell or Longworth.

"Tried to run you down, 'e did!" remarked a newsboy sagely. "'E did an' all!"

"Oh, no," said the near-victim, quickly.

"It did look like it, I must say!" said an elderly woman. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yes . . ." protested the young man.

"Never stopped!" persisted the newsboy, with relish. "As like as not a stolen car." He rolled the pleasantly exciting words round his tongue with joy, and added: "On its way to smash and grab, with firearms, like as not. . . ."

"I must say," said the elderly lady, "it looked quite deliberate."

"It couldn't have been," insisted the young man, with a sudden, rather fearful glance over his shoulder.

"Are you sure you're quite all right?" said the motherly lady.

"Yes: really. . . ."

"I think," said Darrell, "you could probably do with a drink. I know I could, in your place!"

The young man looked up quickly, looked at Darrell searchingly for a moment, then at Longworth. What he saw appeared to satisfy him. Then, with another

abrupt movement, he looked quickly up and down Pall Mall; and there was an unmistakable expression of sudden fear in his eyes. Darrell glanced enquiringly at Longworth: the ghost of a smile answered him.

"I think . . . you're very kind. . . ."

"Good!" said Darrell briskly. "Come along in: we belong to this place, and as a matter of fact, we saw the whole thing from the window."

"Good-bye," said the young man to the elderly lady. "Thank you for being so kind. . . ."

She beamed at him.

"Ain't you going to tell a cop?" asked the newsboy, plainly disappointed at what he considered a lamentably poor finish to a most promising beginning.

"No. Not worth it. . . ."

"You ought to!" said the newsboy, desperately trying to save something from the wreck of his hopes. "Tried to run yer down, 'e did! I seen him. I'll say so! Coo! in a court o' law!"

"Not this time, son." Algy Longworth was firm. "Next time, yes. The time after, with nobs on. But this time, out. Now off you go and sell your lying sheets, and don't mope."

A familiar gesture transferred a sixpence from Longworth's pocket to the small boy's palm. Slightly mollified, the lad moved off, but slowly as if hoping that something else would happen. With an amused smile, Longworth turned and followed Peter Darrell and the stranger into the club.

He caught up with the pair just as they were about to mount the steps leading to the smoking-room.

"I'll fetch Hugh," said Longworth quietly.

Darrell nodded.

"Know where he is?" he asked.

"Shattering the stillness of the silence room," smiled Longworth.

That was a safe bet, reflected Longworth: in that awkward period between the post-lunch port and the pre-dinner short ones, Hugh Drummond was frequently given to snatching a little repose at the expense of the other sleeping partners in that room specially provided for the purpose by a thoughtful Committee. It was dashed difficult, after all, to fill in the time usefully in any other way, if one was stuck in London beyond the end of the season.

As he approached the silence room Algy Longworth smiled to himself. The possible significance of those two backward glances, stolen by the stranger in such a scared way, had no more been lost on him than on Peter Darrell. They gave promise, did those two sharp, frightened glances: promise of something to break the horribly even tenor of a frustrated life in post-war controlled Britain. You didn't seem to be able to do anything by yourself for yourself without dockets, Longworth told himself: even adventure seemed to be rationed. And that had not suited him or Darrell any more than it had suited the big man to whom, throughout the years, they had accorded such unquestioned and such willing obedience as their undisputed leader. Captain Hugh Drummond—known to so many, with affection, as Bulldog—was, Longworth knew, chafing at the bit and raring to go, no less than were Darrell and Longworth himself. It would be fun to see what he could make of the odd scene they had just witnessed.

For Longworth felt in full sympathy with the enthusiastic newsboy.

Longworth peeped into the room: it appeared to be empty, but a spasmodic sound, as if telling the saga of a pair of rhino, came and went and came again in the late autumn air. Longworth approached the chair which seemed to be the seat of the trouble.

“Hugh!”

“Yes, Algy?”

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Once again, Longworth was amazed at the astonishing gift, possessed by this big man, to awake and be in full command of his faculties in the same instant. Just one of the many unexpected qualities which made it next to impossible to take Hugh Drummond by surprise. Algy Longworth laughed.

"Peter and I have got a specimen in the smoking-room."

"How big?"

"Practically nothing at the moment," confessed Longworth. "But we're hoping not to have to throw him back."

An outraged head rose from behind the high back of another chair.

"S-sh!" it said, reprovingly.

With a wink at Longworth, Drummond rose to his feet.

"Sorry!" he murmured, making for the door.

"How can a fellow be expected to read in peace, with members shouting all over the room!" complained the head, lowering itself behind the chair again.

"For read, read sleep!" laughed Drummond, as they left the room. "And I know I can't talk! What's all this, Algy?"

Longworth told him. By the time they joined Peter Darrell and the stranger, Hugh Drummond was acquainted with all the facts. For a man whose normal conversation was on the lightly loquacious side, Longworth had reported with—to anyone but Drummond, who knew him so well—surprising brevity and accuracy.

Darrell grinned as they approached.

"Hullo, Hugh!" He turned to the stranger, who was grasping a strong whisky and soda. "You said your name was Mason . . .?"

"Yes. Henry Mason."

"This is Hugh Drummond."

Mason rose, with a quick look at the big man now smiling towards him.

"Not . . . not *the* Hugh Drummond?"

He seemed awed, as if here was a coincidence beyond normal understanding. Watching him closely, Longworth got the strange impression that this fellow Mason was suddenly delighted, and yet instantaneously afraid again. Longworth glanced quickly at Hugh Drummond, but that cheerful individual's expression betrayed nothing but a slight embarrassment.

"Well . . . er . . ."

"Yes," cut in Darrell quickly. "Bulldog Drummond. But he's a kind, pleasant sort of fellow really. . . ."

They all laughed, Mason a trifle awkwardly.

"I'm sorry!" he said, "but I . . . just couldn't believe it! It seems so extraordinary. . . ."

His voice died away.

"Coincidence?" suggested Longworth hopefully.

"Eh? Oh, no. . . ." Mason spoke quickly. "I mean, one doesn't meet such famous people every day!"

It was a lame finish, and as such, unconvincing. Drummond was conscious of a quick enquiring glance from both Darrell and Longworth, but he paid no attention.

"I say!" he said. "Algy here has just been telling me what happened. What a very nasty experience! Sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yes; rather . . ." replied Mason.

But he did not give the impression of being all right by any means. The man was a bundle of nerves, and gave it away at every turn. The hand that held the glass was shaking, so that he had a certain difficulty in getting the glass to his lips. He drank in gulps, as if he were drinking for effect, and not for enjoyment. His eyes wandered in quick glances towards the window, and scrutinised every new arrival in the room. In fact,

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Drummond told himself, the fellow was as shaky as a jelly. . . .

"Any idea who it was?"

"No, no," said Mason quickly.

Too quickly, said Drummond to himself. And much too emphatically. What's going on here? Can it be . . . no, Drummond reproved himself. He must not allow his common sense to be swayed by wishful thinking . . . but still, he's awfully worried. . . .

"What sort of a car was it?"

"Er . . . an American, I think. . . ."

"Yes," confirmed Darrell. "Big black Packard limousine."

"You're sure?" Mason spoke quickly.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"You didn't see . . . what the driver looked like?"

"Unfortunately not." Darrell smiled apologetically. "And again unfortunately neither Algy nor I could get the number. A taxi got in the line of sight. But the letters were CPN, and I think the last number was three."

"Not much use, I'm afraid," remarked Drummond, "but I think that bloodthirsty newsboy was right, you know, Mason. I do think you should tell the police."

"Oh, no!" Mason suddenly seemed to pull himself together: he continued less vehemently. "Not worth it, really. The bloke obviously lost his head, and perhaps I was a bit foolish too, trying to rush it in front of him."

Peter Darrell leant forward earnestly.

"But you didn't, Mason," he said quietly. "You had plenty of time to cross the road. That driver deliberately accelerated, and he made straight for you. . . ."

"Oh, but that's impossible. . . ."

"He nearly got you."

"Well, yes, I know. It was bad driving, but it couldn't have been deliberate. . . ."

Mason's voice died away as he spoke, as if his thoughts were way ahead of his words, and the effect was to make them unconvincing. Peter Darrell got up and strolled a pace or two to the window: he leant up against it, looking out on to the scene of what had so nearly been a serious accident . . . but was it accident?

Hugh Drummond watched Mason closely: the young man appeared to have become lost in a brown study. Abruptly he finished his drink, and rose.

"Well, thank you fellows very much. I think . . ."

"Hold hard!" said Darrell quietly from the window. "Mason, if you want to see the chap who did it, here he comes!"

The effect of his words was remarkable. Mason cowered away from the window, keeping himself well out of sight. But in one bound Drummond and Longworth were beside Darrell. They were in time to see a large black Packard limousine cruise slowly past the club along Pall Mall. It was empty except for the driver, a powerful-looking fellow with thin features and an aquiline nose. He was looking about him casually, as if to see the result of his previous efforts. . . .

As he passed the club, he suddenly accelerated. The three men watching him were left in no doubt as to his ability to drive. The great car swerved outwards, left a taxi as if it had been standing still, swept between two cars and disappeared in the direction of St. James's Street.

"Accident my foot!" said Darrell softly, the light of excitement in his eye. "It must have been deliberate!"

2: IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND RECEIVES VISITORS

IT is surprising how much can go on in a crowded room without distracting the attention of the majority from the job in hand. The smoking-room was fairly full, but the job in the hands of those present was principally pink gin, sufficiently absorbing—and in this year of grace sufficiently rare—to require the undivided concentration of those imbibing. When Hugh Drummond turned from the window it was with the thought that the sudden movements indulged in by all of his little group must have attracted unwelcome attention. Longworth had nearly upset a small table in his haste to get to the window, and the man Mason's overwhelming desire to take cover must have been conspicuous. However, he found that he need not have worried. The buzz of conversation continued unabated, and if a casual glance had been directed at their corner, then no undue interest seemed to have been aroused.

But there was no sign of Henry Mason.

Hugh Drummond looked around him quickly. Then, abruptly, he saw a figure rising from behind a chair. Mason straightened himself from the crouching attitude into which he had flung himself, a box of matches in his hand.

He smiled, apologetically. At least, it was a contortion of the features which was an effort at a smile.

"Sorry!" he said. "I dropped these. . . ."

He held out the box of matches, and he spoke in a nervous, high-pitched voice. Hugh Drummond did not appear to glance downwards, but he had noticed that the glass from which Mason had been drinking was on

the floor near the chair, the remainder of its contents spreading on the carpet.

"Mason," said Drummond quietly. "We've got to get things much clearer."

"It's . . . it's all right. . . ."

Watching him, Hugh Drummond realised that Henry Mason was making a great effort once more to master his nerves. Although his voice was still pitched higher than it had been before Darrell had abruptly drawn their attention to the window, it was now more controlled. But he was biting out his words, as if over-anxious to give them an emphasis which would impress.

"Oh, no . . . really. I'll . . . I'll be pushing off, and thanks a lot for all your kindness."

Hugh Drummond smiled, a trifle grimly.

"He's still out there, hovering around!" he said.

"What!"

"You know he is!" Drummond gave Mason a second or two, in order to allow the full inference to sink in. Then he continued quietly: "It's been my experience that a man alone is a much easier target than a group."

"Target?"

"Look!" said Drummond curtly. "You owe us an explanation, and you're going to give it, aren't you?"

For a few seconds the two men stood facing each other, staring into each other's steady eyes. Longworth, watching breathlessly, noted and was surprised at the sudden strength of character displayed in that brief moment by Henry Mason. It was very unexpected, coming so soon after a pitiful exhibition of abject fear.

Then, abruptly, Mason smiled: and for the first time it was a real smile. But he said nothing: instead he drew a small notebook from his pocket, and a pencil, and quickly writing on a page, pulled it out and handed it to Drummond.

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Drummond glanced at the paper in his hand. Mason's writing was regular, easy to read :

"Not here," he read, "I daren't discuss anything here . . . too many people. Is there anywhere quiet we could go to? Have you got a house or a flat?"

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"Good!" he said genially. "We'll be able to talk much better in"—he lowered his voice—"the flat. Algy!"

"Yes, Hugh?"

"Hop down and get a cab. We won't show ourselves until it's drawn up outside . . . no point in taking any unnecessary risks!"

"I don't think he'll come back," said Mason unexpectedly, as Longworth hurried off.

"Why not?" asked Darrell.

"I may be miles away by now, as far as he's concerned."

"He came back once . . ." said Darrell doubtfully.

"Yes," said Drummond, "to satisfy himself that he had failed. If he'd succeeded, there'd have been a crowd and an ambulance. So in spite of clearing off, he'll be waiting for the next time . . . isn't that so, Mason?"

Just for a few seconds the stranger paused. Then he looked up, straight into Drummond's eyes.

"You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you?"

"Am I?"

Mason hesitated for another moment: then unexpectedly laughed.

"Maybe you are. Let's be off, shall we?"

Without a word, Hugh Drummond led the way from the room. Mason followed, and Darrell brought up the rear. They found Longworth just coming in to tell them that the taxi was waiting.

No one spoke at all while the short journey was made to Hugh Drummond's flat. Drummond himself was whistling unmelodiously: but it was a sound which

roused elation in the minds both of Darrell and Longworth, for from long experience they knew that Drummond only whistled when he was excited. And Drummond excited meant something up, something which gave promise of adventure. To these two, adventure was not merely the spice of life : it was the only reason for existing.

Mason sat back in his corner of the cab and looked about him nervously, sneaking glances through the back window from time to time. It seemed to Drummond that he had already lost the few moments of composure during which he had practically admitted that his escape from serious injury, if not worse, had been in fact an escape from deliberate attack, and not an escape from an accident. Drummond hoped that, once in the flat, he would be more prepared to talk : for Hugh Drummond was hoping no less earnestly than his two friends that something would come to mar the enforced leisure of these dreary days, something which could usefully—and enjoyably—be done which offered the invigoration of dealing with unknown contingencies, of competing in a hazardous game when the stakes are the maximum. Hugh Drummond had cheerfully risked his life, and called it fun, both in the execution of his duty, and in the quixotic pursuit of happiness for some comparative stranger. His was the sort of character to whom all in trouble turned, to whom anything unfair was as a red rag to a bull, to whom the greatest achievement in life was to be able to put things right for those who in any way deserved it. All that his soft heart asked for itself was a liberal supply of beer.

As soon as they were safely in the study of Drummond's flat, and the tankards were full, it was evident that Henry Mason had lost that mood of co-operation which had flashed upon him for so few seconds just before leaving the club.

"Captain Drummond," he said, "it's awfully good of

you to bother about me . . . but really there's nothing to bother about."

"What!" gasped Algy Longworth. "Nothing to bother about when a chap is deliberately charged by a bally Packard in the open street!"

"But I wasn't!"

"Hold hard!" cut in Peter Darrell. "This won't do, Mason. You said as much yourself before we came here. . . ."

Hugh Drummond was watching his guest carefully: he noticed now the moment of hesitation before he replied.

"Frankly, you fellows were so insistent that I almost believed it myself, for the moment. But obviously it's ridiculous! Things like that simply don't happen nowadays."

"I wonder!" said Drummond quietly. "Cigarette?"

He offered his case to his guest.

"Thanks."

Mason took one: but the hand that took it was still shaking, and he found difficulty in lighting it. The moment he had done so, he took a quick gulp of his drink.

"You're still feeling a trifle shaky, aren't you?" said Drummond abruptly, and in a tone of voice which made the words almost a statement rather than a question. Both Darrell and Longworth recognised that tone of voice, and looked up at Drummond quickly.

"No, no!" denied Mason, forcing a smile. "I'm quite all right now, thanks. . . ."

"You're feeling . . . normal?"

"Perfectly."

Hugh Drummond laughed suddenly.

"I must say," he smiled, "for a fellow who's feeling normal, you're giving a perfectly splendid imitation of a cat with D.T.'s, imagining it's got a monkey on its back, and dancing on scalding bricks. Why?"

There was a long silence.

"I think you'd better tell me why," continued Drummond very quietly, "because it's not awfully good for a chap to be in the state of nerves you're obviously in : alone it can lead to all sorts of accidents. And if, in addition, somebody is loose actually trying to arrange an accident . . . the combination might easily prove fatal. Don't you agree?"

A look of stubborn defiance came over Mason's expression. He sat quite still, and said nothing in reply.

"Tell me, young man . . ." said Drummond cheerfully, "d'you want to die?"

Henry Mason visibly shuddered.

"Of course not!"

"You're not . . . really asking for death?"

"Don't!"

It was almost a moan : kindly, Hugh Drummond changed his tone.

"Sorry if I had to treat you a bit rough!" he said gently, "but, you know, you're not very communicative . . . and if we're to help, we must know all the facts. . . ."

"Why should you help?"

Drummond lighted a cigarette.

"Well," he said quietly, "just because we happen to be the sort of people who believe that's what we were born to do. We came into the world a bit privileged, you see, so perhaps we feel we ought to pay a bit back." He hurried on quickly : it was not in his nature to treat serious things too seriously, and a profession of faith was a lamentably serious thing, to be made only when it was completely unavoidable. "But don't run away with the idea that we don't enjoy it! We do! We love poking our noses into other people's business, specially if it means putting paid to . . . well, to savages touring the streets running people down!"

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Abruptly Henry Mason put down his drink, and rose to his feet.

"Captain Drummond," he said evenly, more quietly than he had spoken up to that moment, "don't think I'm not grateful. I am . . . to you and to your friends. But it simply isn't fair to bring you into this . . . this trouble of mine. I've got to see it through by myself."

"Now don't be selfish!" said Longworth urgently. "You . . ."

But he paused on a sign from Drummond.

"Why should you see it through by yourself?"

"I've told you, Captain Drummond. It simply wouldn't be fair, that's all!"

Hugh Drummond smiled to him.

"Because there'd be four targets . . . instead of one?"

Henry Mason hesitated.

"Maybe. . . ."

"I've been a respectable citizen for so long," said Drummond lightly, "that the idea of becoming a target appeals enormously. You see, I've spent a lot of my life in just that capacity. . . ."

Mason laughed.

"I know that, Captain Drummond."

"And as for these two mugs, why . . . I quite believe they would rather enjoy it too!"

"You bet I would!" laughed Longworth.

"That goes for me too!" smiled Darrell.

"I wish I could really express my thanks," said Mason quietly. "I'm truly grateful. But . . . it simply can't be done."

They looked at him for a moment in silence. Then Hugh Drummond grinned.

"It's your final choice, of course. But I warn you of one thing: we're difficult to shake off."

"What do you know about me?" asked Mason abruptly.

"Nothing, yet . . ." smiled Drummond.

"How d'you know that, by helping me, you'd be helping the right side?"

"My dear fellow!" laughed Drummond. "That's elementary! You're against a cold-blooded pirate who's out to commit murder."

"He may have good reason."

"There is no good reason for murder. If you want anybody killed, and the good reason is there, the law will despatch him for you."

Algy Longworth nodded with approval.

"It's less messy that way," he suggested.

Henry Mason laughed loud and long: somehow, he seemed now to have rid himself of his nervousness.

"You're impossible, all three of you! And I'm darned glad to have met you: you've done me a power of good. But you're out of luck!" He became serious again. "I've got to see this thing through by myself . . . got to!"

The unexpected sound of the front-door bell sharply ringing startled them all.

"I'll go . . ." said Darrell.

"Half a tick, Peter!"

Drummond unconsciously spoke in an undertone: but the voice commanded obedience. They all watched him as he moved quickly and silently to the side of the window, and using the drawn curtains to conceal his action, looked out. In a moment he turned back, and faced the others in the room. Algy Longworth and Peter Darrell felt their pulses quicken as they noticed a well-remembered light in his eyes.

"Mason," he said quietly, "I'm afraid you can't see this thing through by yourself. You see, the other side has come here to consult me. That Packard is outside the door."

3: IN WHICH PETER DARRELL MAKES A DISCOVERY

ALL the newly-found self-confidence which Henry Mason seemed to have acquired was gone in a flash. Once again he was an abject figure, a pitiful caricature of a man. The so totally unexpected proximity of the individual who had so recently tried to exterminate him was too much for his tattered nerves, and he cowered away as far as possible from the door of the room.

"So you're going to see this thing through by yourself!" murmured Peter Darrell scathingly.

It is doubtful if Darrell knew that he had spoken aloud: the words were really only the expression of what was passing through his mind. And the scathing tones of his voice exaggerated the scorn which he felt, for in reality the cowering figure provoked more pity than blame. Mason, for whatever the reason might be which he resolutely refused to give, appeared to have given way to his nerves in a manner which clearly indicated that some strain, probably of long duration, had been too much for him to bear.

But, although Darrell's comment had been low, Mason had heard it. He glanced quickly, anxiously, at Darrell. His eyes seemed to plead for a moment, seemed to be trying to send a message that, whatever he might do, it was not his fault. Darrell got the uncomfortable feeling that his censure was not wholly deserved, that the contrast between Mason's brave words and, now, his panic at this totally unexpected development, was something perhaps understandable, but only by someone who knew the whole story which up to now Mason had so tenaciously withheld. . . .

Tenaciously ! said Darrell to himself. That was the odd thing, because it was the right word, and yet it implied courage ! And look at the blighter now !

The front door bell again rang sharply, even peremptorily.

"Pull yourself together, man !" said Algy Longworth, but he was silenced by a quick gesture from Drummond.

"Mason," said Drummond quickly but firmly. "Go through that door . . . it leads to my bedroom. Get in there and wait."

"But you don't know . . ." began Mason, in an unnaturally high voice.

Hugh Drummond cut in upon him quickly.

"I know enough !"

"But . . ."

"What's the matter with you, man !" Hugh Drummond laughed lightly. "No one can do anything to you in here . . . in my flat . . . when the three of us, and a stout wall, are between you and him ! Get along with you !"

Algy Longworth strolled to the door, and opened it.

"Don't argue, old bird !" he said with a smile. "Have a nice lie-down !"

Abruptly making up his mind, Henry Mason went through rapidly into the bedroom. Longworth closed the door behind him, and turned to Drummond with a smile. "Shivers well and easily to-day, doesn't he ?"

But Hugh Drummond did not smile back. Instead, he spoke in an unusually serious voice, with gentle reproof.

"He may have good reason to, Algy. Peter, answer the door, will you ? . . . and, both of you, leave the talking to me."

"Aye, aye, sir !"

Drummond sat down, and lighted a cigarette. Longworth followed his example. They heard Darrell open

the front door of the flat, heard a deep voice ask if Captain Drummond were in, heard Darrell acknowledge the fact.

As Darrell came back to the room, preceding the visitor, there was a vague smile playing about his lips. Algy Longworth immediately recognised in it a sign of anticipatory thrill, and he felt in full sympathy. Was it possible that, out of the blue, the recent events of that evening were, most satisfactorily from his point of view, to hasten the pace of the ever-changing English scene?

The stranger who entered the room, following Peter Darrell, was tall, dark and much thinner than the quick sight of him—which they had glimpsed as he had driven his great car down Pall Mall—had indicated. But he gave the impression of physical power all the same, for his lissom walk was that of the fit man. And not only physical power: his thin, almost pointed, features and his long aquiline nose gave promise of character, of the sort of man who would follow any project tenaciously, and possibly with that type of tenacity which is not over-troubled by scruples. Yet, now that they met him face to face, the first impression he gave was not unpleasant: the intelligent eyes, brightly hard, yet gave promise of humour: the thin, strong mouth belied its possible indication of cruelty with a catching smile.

Hugh Drummond and Algy Longworth rose as he entered.

“Captain Drummond?”

“That’s me,” smiled Drummond.

“Thank you,” said the stranger, and also smiled.

“My name is Philip Jenner. My business is confidential. These gentlemen . . .?”

His voice died away in an obvious request for information.

Hugh Drummond laughed.

“This is Algy Longworth. The chap who let you

in is Peter Darrell. Old buddies both. No secrets between us, sort of thing. . . ."

The stranger frowned slightly.

"All the same, Captain Drummond . . ."

"Mr. Jenner," cut in Drummond curtly, "whatever may be the reason for your visit will have to be explained to all three of us . . . or not at all."

The two men stood facing each other in silence for a moment: then Jenner dropped his eyes.

"Have a drink?" suggested Drummond easily.

"Beer? It's weak, but it still pours. . . ."

Jenner looked up with a quick smile.

"Thank you."

"Good! Algy, the wherewithal!"

"Coming up!" grinned Longworth, as he moved to procure the refreshment.

"And while you're about it, I'll have a refill!"

"So will I!" murmured Darrell, picking up Drummond's tankard and moving after Longworth.

"Captain Drummond," said Jenner quickly, in a low tone. "I still think what I have to say would be better said to you alone."

"What's the trouble?" asked Drummond. "Afraid of a leakage?"

Jenner made a deprecating gesture with his hand.

"Please don't think I doubt their integrity or their discretion. But there are certain things which should be known to as few as possible."

"You interest me," replied Drummond quietly.

"But, you see, we work as a team. Always have done, always will do. We're a . . . sort of private company!"

"Unlimited."

"Eh?"

Jenner smiled again, an attractive smile.

"A private company unlimited."

Drummond, in that instant, was reminded of the old tag: "When you say that, smile!" The words were

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capable of more than one meaning, but the stranger had smiled, and very pleasantly.

"Do I take that as a compliment?"

"It was intended as such."

"In that case," Drummond abruptly laughed, "thank you very much."

"But you won't change your mind?"

"I'm afraid not. The team . . . or nothing."

Philip Jenner sighed.

"The greatest," he said quietly, "are those who can gracefully change their minds."

"Quite possibly," smiled Drummond.

"You are not yet in possession of the facts. I am. You will not allow me to judge . . .?"

Hugh Drummond, still smiling slightly, slowly shook his head.

"I never allow anyone to judge anything for me. Nastily conceited, aren't I?"

Just for a second, Drummond thought he glimpsed an abrupt gleam in the other's eye. But, if it had ever existed, it was gone in a flash. Jenner at once spoke evenly and pleasantly.

"Not at all. All virtues have their compensating handicaps, and—if I may say so—it is always pleasant to meet a man who has the guts to make up his own mind."

"Are you English?" asked Drummond curiously.

The other smiled.

"No. I come from Switzerland."

"Do you, now! A lovely country!"

"And a lovely drink!" said Algy Longworth, handing over two foaming tankards. "It's quite surprising how this water froths! Must be very soft . . . it can't be the one hop in the barrel!"

Drummond gestured towards a chair, and himself sat down in another. It was not lost on Peter Darrell that the chair offered to Jenner was facing the light, and

that Drummond was sitting with his back to it. Darrell and Longworth seated themselves also, and the three looked expectantly at their visitor.

"What I have to say may take a little time," began Jenner quietly, "but I'll cut it as short as I can."

"Good!" said Drummond encouragingly. "I'm glad you've accepted my terms, Jenner. I was desperately afraid you might not . . . and I should have hated that . . . you really have made me go all curious!"

Philip Jenner smiled.

"I was warned you might be difficult!"

"Oh? So we have a mutual acquaintance?"

"We have. However, to explain my unexpected visit. . . ."

"Just one second!" Algy Longworth leant forward.

"Let's get thoroughly cosy first. Cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

"Really? Well, I hope you don't mind if I do, because I do. Got a light, Peter?"

Darrell tossed over his lighter. Longworth used it, and returned it.

"That's fine!" he grinned. "Now I'm all ears."

"Ears that have no contact with your speech, I hope!"

"Eh?"

Jenner laughed at the look of surprise on Algy Longworth's face.

"I merely meant that I must ask you to treat what I am going to say as strictly confidential."

"Entirely between ourselves," agreed Drummond.

"Right." Jenner paused: now that the moment had come to explain himself and his presence, he seemed to find it difficult to start. When he did speak, it was rather apologetically at first: but as he got into his tale, his words flowed confidently and convincingly. "A young man very nearly had a nasty accident in

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Pall Mall, not so very long ago. I can only assume that you were witnesses to that near accident, since he disappeared from the street almost at once. From the street into your club."

He paused.

Peter Darrell leant forward.

"How do you know that?"

"For the moment, never mind how!" replied Jenner at once, and he turned to Drummond. "I think, Captain Drummond, it would be better if I told my story straight through without interruption. It is not too easy to tell convincingly, and I must convince you. When I have done, all questions will of course be perfectly in order. . . ."

"Yes," agreed Hugh Drummond without hesitation. "Be patient, Peter!"

"Sorry," murmured Darrell.

"What tale that young man, whose name is Henry Mason, told you, I have naturally very little idea. He might, perhaps, have suggested that he was the victim of some sort of persecution. He might, as a matter of fact, have told you pretty well anything. Of one thing I can be certain, however: he must have struck you as being in an extremely nervous mental condition. And—forgive me, Captain Drummond—he is obviously just the sort of person who might tempt you to be curious about his affairs, particularly in the present state of life in this country of yours, when an independent and enterprising man like yourself must be very nearly bursting with frustration.

"Be that as it may, Mason has succeeded in interesting you. You and your friends brought him from your club to this flat. It was then that I realised that I must interfere."

He paused. But if he had hoped that he might find some clue to the sort of reception which his story was receiving from his hosts, he was disappointed. Hugh

Drummond was sitting back in his chair, a dreamy expression in his eyes which gave away nothing. Algy Longworth was quietly sipping his beer. Peter Darrell seemed wholly absorbed in enjoying his cigarette. None of the three said a word. They waited silently for Jenner to continue the tale.

"Henry Mason is an Englishman, but he was educated entirely in Switzerland at a school near the lake of Geneva. He was a very brilliant boy who was allowed grossly to overwork. As a youth, he was already showing the strain. As a young man, he was definitely no longer normal. Two years ago, he tried to kill his mother . . . and very nearly succeeded. He had to be put under restraint, in a private home. One month ago he escaped and disappeared. Last week I received information that he had been seen in London, and I came over at once, hoping either to take him back, or to arrange for him safely to be looked after here. I know all this, and I ask you please to believe me, because you see I am married to the boy's mother. When his father died she later became my wife."

He paused again, and abruptly picked up his tankard and took a long drink. Watching him narrowly, Drummond noticed that he appeared a trifle upset: just about the right amount, thought Drummond to himself. Either this bloke was telling the truth, or he was a consummate actor . . . and what he had said would, of course, account for the weird behaviour of their other guest now hiding in his bedroom. But there was the extraordinary driving of that big Packard to account for, that vicious swerve which Peter Darrell had seen, and which so nearly had brought the life of Henry Mason to an abrupt and messy end. Hugh Drummond, however, gave no sign of the thoughts passing through his mind: that so useful and so lazy expression still masked his eyes. And, as usual, both Longworth and Darrell took their cue from their leader: Longworth

was now blowing rings with the smoke from his cigarette, Darrell was apparently engrossed in his ale.

"Well, gentlemen," said Jenner suddenly, "that's very nearly all. When I arrived in London I at once contacted the only person whom he might have rushed to see . . . a girl of whom he had once been fond. But she knew nothing of him. The police could not help, but they were naturally interested. Then, this evening, I saw Mason crossing Pall Mall as I was driving down it. I was amazed, and I am afraid temporarily lost my head. I could not stop and accost him: it would have meant a most painful public scene, because of course the boy would have tried to escape, might have said anything! And as I just stared, two things happened. You know how, when you're driving a car, if your attention is drawn to one side you are apt to steer unconsciously towards that side. That happened, and I suddenly realised I was in danger of running him down. My foot then slipped, as I tried to put on the brake, and partially touched the accelerator: so the car leapt forward. I only just managed to miss him, and I was quite some way down the Mall before I recovered my wits sufficiently to realise that I was in danger of again losing the needle in the haystack of London. So as I could not turn, I made my way round again and drove slowly down Pall Mall: there was no sign of Mason. I was, naturally, bitterly disappointed. It was not until quite a little time later that I remembered there had been a newspaper boy on the pavement: I had seen him as I flashed past the first time, almost out of control. Perhaps he might be able to help me. So back I went again and most luckily found him.

"At first he was very rude indeed! Accused me of being a murderer! But then, when I told him that I wanted to apologise, he was very helpful. Especially after I had given him a half-crown! He told me that two toffs had taken my near victim into a club, and

that a little later they—and a very big man too—had taken him off in a taxi-cab to this address. The curiosity of the urchin, who hangs about and listens to addresses being given to drivers and then remembers them, is just another example of the individual enterprise of the British which I so much admire ! ”

Jenner rose to his feet, having first drained his tankard. There seemed, somehow, a new and rather sudden triumph in his attitude : he stood and looked around, almost with a touch of defiance, at the three men watching him from their chairs. For Hugh Drummond had not moved, and although Longworth and Darrell presented a similar picture of languid idleness, they were unostentatiously watching their leader alertly, ready to respond to any movement he might make. But Drummond remained in his comfortable chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his eyes still masked by that lazy, good-natured if somewhat foolish expression, one which could give on selected occasion a totally false impression of the speed with which his mind was working.

Almost in spite of himself, Jenner frowned. That frown was very indicative of what he was no doubt thinking, for it advertised a not wholly unnatural surprise. Of all things which you might expect as a right from Hugh Drummond, gentlemanly manners was most certainly almost the first, Jenner seemed to be saying to himself. Why, then, does he not get up from that chair, when I have given such an obvious hint that this interview is at an end ?

Still absolutely motionless and silent, Hugh Drummond sat on. He scarcely seemed to be conscious that he had a visitor at all. Jenner glanced quickly at Longworth and Darrell, but the former was staring at the ceiling in a vacant sort of way, and Darrell was examining his tankard as if to make quite sure that there was no possible drop of liquid which had been overlooked. Jenner flushed slightly : he knew that he had told his

story well, and he did not like this type of treatment. He turned squarely to face Drummond.

"And so, Captain Drummond, I think you will agree that the best thing you can do is to hand over young Henry Mason into my care. I have to thank you and your friends very much indeed for bringing him here : you have saved me much embarrassment by making it possible for me to take charge of him again without publicity, and his mother will, I assure you, be most grateful. My poor dear wife is in the unhappy state of never having a moment's peace while her own boy is free ! It is tragic, but unfortunately much in life is a tragedy ! Will you please tell me where he is now ?"

"We're moving just a trifle too fast," said Drummond quietly.

"Eh ?"

"I said you wanted to go a trifle too fast."

Slowly Hugh Drummond hoisted his huge frame from his chair. Simultaneously, Algy Longworth uncoiled his long legs and stood up also ; and Peter Darrell rose lazily. The effect of the slow movements of all three men might have seemed deliberately ominous to a sensitive man.

Whether or not the visitor was taken aback was not obvious. But the flush on his face remained, and he spoke curtly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand . . . ? What else is there for you to do ?"

"There might be . . . well, quite, a lot of things !" Hugh Drummond told him, but he was smiling pleasantly.

"You see, Mr. Jenner, you've told us a story. If I may say so, you've told it very well. Most convincingly. But . . ."

He paused, and seemed to be in a difficulty about choosing his words.

Jenner frowned angrily.

"You mean I may have told you a pack of lies ?" he challenged.

"Ye-es," said Drummond coolly. "Yes, of course

you may have!" Drummond laughed abruptly, a friendly sound. "But I'm not saying you have. You must realise, however, that my friends and I, suffering from that frustration you were talking about so recently, are very reluctant to accept such a simple explanation for what did promise to develop into . . . so much of what we call fun."

He laughed again, and this time Jenner smiled in response.

"I think I understand. You want . . . proof."

"Just that little thing!" agreed Hugh Drummond emphatically.

"There is, of course, no documentary proof available," said Jenner seriously.

"No committal papers?"

"No." Jenner seemed apologetic. "Had Mason been sent to a public institution—as I appreciate many might think he should have been—there would of course have been documents. But his mother wished to avoid the scandal. So he was being looked after privately, as I told you. There are no documents of any sort."

"I see," said Drummond musingly, "that makes it very awkward."

"Leave to speak, sir, please!" suddenly said Algy Longworth.

Jenner looked at him in surprise, but Drummond only laughed.

"Yes, Algy?"

"He said you shared a mutual acquaintance."

"So he did!" smiled Drummond. "Somebody who might, perhaps, act as a sort of reference! Thank you, Algy!"

"Not at all. Always ready to oblige."

"You heard what he said?" said Drummond, turning back to his visitor. "I think you mentioned that you knew someone who had described me to you. Would you mind my referring to that person with regard to you?"

Jenner smiled.

"Of course not ! A very good idea."

"And that person is . . . ?"

"Inspector McIver, of Scotland Yard."

If it can ever be truthfully said that the face of a man can fall, Jenner's totally unexpected statement caused just this happening in triplicate. Hugh Drummond, visibly surprised, simply stared at him : but both Longworth and Darrell unconsciously allowed their jaws to drop. To both of them, Jenner's tale had not been convincing. The little touches of sentiment had seemed, somehow, out of place in a man, on the surface at least, so completely devoid of sentiment. They had given a theatrical impression to a tale in which, of course, both Longworth and Darrell were unwilling to believe : an adventure had started, and most promisingly at that, and both were more than reluctant to let it fizzle out in such a damping fashion.

"I see," said Jenner quietly, "that the name impresses all three of you. I am not surprised. The integrity of Inspector McIver is, of course, above suspicion."

"Algy !" said Drummond, with a grin. "I feel I need another beer !"

"Aye, aye, sir !"

Longworth took his own tankard, as well as Drummond's, to the barrel in the corner of the room.

"That," said Jenner curtly, "is, I feel, uncharacteristically rude, Captain Drummond !"

"Of course it is !" Hugh Drummond laughed gaily. "What are you thinking of, Algy ? The guest's tankard first, old cock ! You ought to know that by now !"

As, with a smile, Darrell picked up the tankard which Jenner had left on the small table by the chair he had just vacated, the tall stranger stopped him with a gesture.

"No, Mr. Darrell." Jenner turned back to Drummond. "Captain Drummond, you are making yourself ridiculous, you and your friends. I had heard that

you were all children always playing some game and living in an adventurous fairy tale of your own : I had no idea how accurate my informant was being ! Henry Mason, a dangerous lunatic with homicidal tendencies, is hiding here in your flat, with your connivance. Your action in protecting this man is at least dangerous, perhaps criminal. Will you hand him over to me . . . now . . . or won't you ? Yes or no ? ”

The smile never left Hugh Drummond's face. But, watching him closely in that tense moment, Darrell and Longworth saw clearly the sudden glint in those blue eyes. Darrell momentarily caught Longworth's eye : a swift, secret smile passed between them. They knew very well that Hugh Drummond, on occasion, could be even more stubborn than the next man : and that nothing was more calculated to create that mood than a threat.

Very quietly, but there was almost a menacing undercurrent of authority in the soft voice, Hugh Drummond spoke :

“ I hope you will understand, Mr. Jenner, that this is a most serious matter. At the moment, I have only your word for what you say. I believe some people on sight, not others. If you don't like that remark, complain to Inspector McIver. I will not hand over Henry Mason to you now . . . that's flat. What I will do, however, is to investigate your story immediately, but for that I shall require a little more information from you.”

“ Certainly. What do you want to know ? ”

Hugh Drummond did not hesitate, even if he were surprised at the sudden change of attitude on the part of his visitor.

“ You have given the name of Inspector McIver. But I feel that part of your information about us could scarcely have come from that eminent friend of mine. Who was your informant ? ”

Jenner laughed, a humourless sound.

"Many people. You are not unknown, Captain Drummond."

"Arising out of that question, as the politicians say," said Hugh Drummond casually, perhaps too casually, "how did you know you were calling on me when you arrived here?"

Jenner flushed suddenly.

"I don't understand . . ."

"Oh, yes, you do. When you arrived, you unhesitatingly asked for Captain Drummond. Why? According to your story you got the address from a newsboy in Pall Mall."

"Not only from him."

The answer was swift, smooth. Hugh Drummond looked up quickly, stared at his visitor. But Jenner met his questioning gaze unflinchingly.

"Captain Drummond," he said quietly, "before I came here I was given your address. I was told that if I could not find this poor step-son of mine, and if—as they well might be—the police were unhelpful, you would be my best chance. So when that newspaper boy gave me your address, I recognised it . . . with, I may say, a good deal more relief than recent events have justified."

He's certainly putting up a darned good show, said Drummond to himself. And he's right to make that last crack, if he's honest. But is he? Mason's fear—it was real, I'll stake a lot on that—could be explained by the longing for liberty, in fact by Jenner's story . . . but somehow I feel there's more to it than that. Or am I making an ass of myself, just because I'm bored, just because I'm ready to clutch at anything that promises a bit of fun, and won't let go even when I ought to . . . ?

"That girl . . . his friend . . ." began Drummond aloud.

"Her name is Cynthia Evershed."

"Address?"

"At present staying at the Royal Hotel in Bayswater."

"Very well," said Drummond with sudden decision.

"Give me time to investigate, and if everything tallies, then I'll hand him over. . . ."

Jenner, for a moment, hesitated. Then he spoke almost apologetically.

"Captain Drummond, I wonder if you quite realise the responsibility you are so light-heartedly assuming? This boy Mason is mad . . . possibly a homicidal maniac. True, he has so far only attacked the one who loves him best—his own mother. That is a well recognised symptom of worse to come. At any moment he may attack indiscriminately—and obviously anyone who looks, to his warped mind, to be a threat to his new-found liberty will be swept aside with as little compunction as you or I would kill an annoying fly. I know you are no coward, but . . . you are gratuitously taking on a tremendous responsibility. I have no idea what story the boy has spun for your benefit . . . but is it worth it?"

For answer, Hugh Drummond turned to Algy Longworth.

"Not filled that tankard yet, Algy?"

"So sorry!" Longworth laughed, although his gaiety sounded a little forced. "Standing here so absorbed in your conversation . . . shan't be a tick!"

Drummond turned to Jenner.

"You won't join us?"

"If you don't mind, no."

"Very well. If you wouldn't mind leaving us . . . and coming back in an hour. You'll have your answer then."

"Be it on your own head!" Jenner moved towards the door, and then abruptly turned. "But, Captain Drummond, if you lose that young man, I shall hold

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you personally responsible. And so, I dare say, will the relatives of all those others whom he may destroy. . . .”

Jenner left the room. They heard the outer door of the flat close firmly. Drummond moved to the window : from it he watched Jenner enter his Packard and drive away. Only then did he turn towards his two friends.

“Well ?” he asked.

“Too smooth,” suggested Darrell hopefully.

“Let’s see what old Mac has to say about him !”

Drummond went to the telephone, and dialled a number. In a very short time he was answered.

“Hullo ? Captain Drummond here . . . can I speak to Inspector McIver ? What ? Away ? When’ll he be back ? Oh, I see . . . no, it doesn’t matter. . . .”

Drummond replaced the receiver and sat motionless for a moment. Then he turned to face the others.

“Algy !” he said, and instantly—with a welcoming lift of the heart—Darrell and Longworth recognised that orders were coming. “You’d better go and make yourself pleasant to this Cynthia Evershed.”

“I was hoping you’d say that !” grinned Longworth.

“But not too pleasant, even if she does turn out to be a devastating blonde ! Just confirmation . . . or not !”

Algy Longworth laughed.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Off with you, then. We haven’t got much time . . . be back in three-quarters of an hour. Royal Hotel, Bayswater.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Longworth seized his hat, and ran from the room, looking at his watch.

Hugh Drummond smiled at Peter Darrell.

“Darned nuisance Mac’s away. Won’t be back, apparently, until late to-morrow. While we’re waiting for Algy, we’d better have a word with young Henry Mason. Get him, will you, Peter. . . .”

Darrell walked over to the door of the bedroom.

He opened it, and was about to pass through when the sight that met his eyes pulled him up short.

"*Hugh!*"

"Yes?"

"Look!"

Hugh Drummond was already behind Darrell, and looking over his shoulder. He saw the twisted form of Henry Mason lying on the floor by the open window. A dark pool of blood was spreading slowly round his head.

4: IN WHICH ALGY LONGWORTH MEETS A BLONDE

ALGY LONGWORTH was unable to find a taxi, so that the journey to the Royal Hotel in Bayswater took him rather longer than he had expected. He looked at his watch as he approached the front door, and noted with a certain apprehension that the bus ride and short walk had used up nearly twenty minutes of his valuable time. As he was about to enter the hotel he noticed that there was a taxi drawn up in front of the door, and he turned towards it with the idea of exerting all his charm and persuading the driver to wait for his return journey. But as he did so, a charming, but questioning, voice spoke from just beside him.

"Mr. Algy Longworth?"

Longworth looked round quickly, and found himself staring in unabashed admiration at the girl who had just spoken. She was a blonde all right: some of her very fair curls were visible caressing the sides of her small perky hat. She was, perhaps, just a trifle on the tall side: but to Algy Longworth's critical eye she seemed made to a remarkably attractive pattern.

"I don't believe it."

The girl looked surprised.

"What did you say?"

"It's impossible," said Longworth firmly. "You know me, and yet in some extraordinary way I can't place you. Quite ridiculous, of course, but probably the last time we met was when you were all in pigtailed with . . ."

"Look!" said the girl. "We . . ."

" . . . with an all-day sucker stuck in your mouth, and a nice piece of well-prepared chewing gum ready to put on any chair I looked like sitting on. But I'm afraid . . ."

"Do stop!" said the girl. "You see . . ."

"But I'm afraid I'm frightfully busy at the moment," went on Longworth with determination, getting out a small diary and examining it, "although, of course, that cannot be allowed to interfere indefinitely with this delightful reunion . . . so what are you doing next Tuesday? How about a few snifters and a spot of food, with a show and a dash of dancing to follow?"

"Please!" The girl frowned slightly. "This is important. . . ."

"Of course it's important!" agreed Longworth with alacrity. "If Tuesday doesn't suit, what about Thursday? Or I could manage Friday at a pinch. I'd be grateful if you could make up your mind: I'm in a hurry to see a person who lives in this hotel . . . on business, of course."

He looked up from his diary at the girl: she was staring at him with rather a peculiar expression on her face.

"A person . . .?"

"Yes. God knows what she'll be like. . . ."

"What's her name?"

"D'you live here too? Perhaps you know her . . . somebody called Cynthia Evershed."

"I am Cynthia Evershed," the girl said quietly, and added: "I think you said a *person* . . ."

If she had expected to see any embarrassment on the part of Algy Longworth, she had misjudged her man.

"I talk too fast," said that worthy without hesitation, "and sometimes use the wrong word by mistake. It's an old habit, of which successive governesses failed to cure me. It was largely the reason why the post of governess to Longworth was so frequently on offer with no takers. But referring back to Tuesday . . ."

"Captain Drummond wants you to take me to his flat at once. I've got this taxi waiting. . . ."

Cynthia Evershed noticed that she had created an impression at last: Algy Longworth was visibly taken aback.

"Eh? "

"He's just telephoned. Said you were coming to see me, mentioned Henry Mason's name, persuaded me it was a vital matter, and asked me to be ready when you arrived. Here I am."

"Quite," said Longworth promptly. "Let's go, shall we? I don't like keeping Hugh waiting. . . ."

They got into the cab, and Longworth gave the driver the address. For a few moments they drove along in silence: then Longworth heard the girl speak softly:

"God knows what she'll be like. . . ."

"I never apologise," said Algy Longworth promptly. "It's an old custom which my family would have inherited from Henry the Eighth if we had been related. Tell me, Miss Evershed . . . how did you recognise me? "

The girl smiled to herself.

"I was given a very accurate description."

"Really? By Hugh? "

"Yes. He first of all asked me if I were a blonde, and then said, 'Look out for a long, thin streak of impertinence, dressed in ratcatcher, all eyeglass and

check'." She laughed merrily. "I had no difficulty at all in picking you out."

"Thanks."

"Not a bit."

There was a short pause.

"I say . . ." she began.

"Yes?" said Longworth stiffly.

"Your friend Drummond is pretty persuasive, isn't he?"

"Yes."

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"I can't think why I agreed to this."

"Really?"

"No."

"Oh? I thought you said he mentioned Henry Mason."

"Yes, he did. But still . . ."

"Aren't you supposed to be . . .?"

"No," said the girl emphatically. "And even if I'm supposed to be, I'm not!"

"Well, that's all to the good. . . ."

She smiled mischievously.

"Thawing?"

"Thawed."

She laughed, a sound which struck Algy Longworth as being distinctly musical.

"That's all to the good, too."

"Did he mention a chap called Jenner?"

The effect of Algy Longworth's innocent question was startling. Cynthia Evershed, from having been a pleasantly gay companion, suddenly seemed turned into ice. She caught her breath sharply on the sound of that name. She sat bolt upright for several seconds; her whole body seemed to stiffen. The rather excited but relaxed joyfulness of her mood gave abrupt place first to tense horror, and then equally suddenly to some sort of wild panic.

"Stop the car!"

"Here, I say . . .!"

"Stop the taxi. *Stop it!* Or I'll scream!"

"You are screaming, my dear!" Longworth told her ruefully, "and unless you stop screaming, my gloriously innocent character will come in for a good deal of wholly undeserved criticism!"

But Algy Longworth made no attempt to communicate with the driver. He was watching his companion closely, and for several moments he wondered which side the coin would fall: the lovely face of the girl was showing all too plainly the severe strain to which her mind was subjecting her, and he realised that it was a complete toss-up whether she would carry out her threat, with all its unpleasant consequences, or whether her natural control would re-establish itself.

She leant forward suddenly, as if to thump on the glass behind the driver's head. Quietly, but very firmly, Algy Longworth intercepted her, and took her slender wrist in his large hand.

"No, Cynthia!"

They stared at each other for a second, each recognising the purpose in the other's eyes. Then, quietly and soothingly, Longworth played his last card:

"You said yourself that Hugh Drummond was a persuasive bloke. He is. He wants to see you—at once, on a matter of importance—and that's good enough for me: he shall, as soon as I can get you to him. As for Jenner, he won't even be there. . . ."

With a great sense of relief, Longworth saw the girl relax.

"You're sure of that?"

"Certain."

"You wouldn't fool me?"

"No, I wouldn't fool you."

She hesitated for one more moment.

"Promise?"

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"Faithfully."

There was quite a little pause. Then, impulsively, Cynthia Evershed leant towards him.

"I'm so sorry," she spoke quietly again, "but . . . I hate that man."

"Jenner? We don't like him either."

"What do you know of him?"

"Nothing much. As a matter of fact, that was why I was sent round to see you—to find out something about him. But we'd better keep that subject for Hugh: he's evidently changed his mind, and wants to ask you himself."

She looked at him with a new interest.

"You're very fond of Hugh Drummond, aren't you?"

Algy Longworth laughed gaily.

"My dear girl, of course I am."

He said no more, but the tribute was complete, and Cynthia Evershed recognised it as such. The tone of voice in which the few words had been spoken was in itself more than an indication of real affection: the sudden, almost rapt expression on Longworth's face clearly showed an unusual admiration: the last three words testified to a faith which was charming in its intensity.

"I liked his voice on the telephone."

"You'll like him."

"He's very famous, isn't he?"

"Yes, in spite of himself."

She glanced at Longworth mischievously.

"Can he do wrong?"

"Well," said Longworth seriously, "he's human, of course. It rather depends what you mean by wrong. I'll tell you this: he's never done anyone harm in his life. Come to that, he's done an awful lot of people an awful lot of good."

"I think you're sweet!" said Cynthia Evershed.

Algy Longworth grinned.

"Attagirl! Keep on thinking it."

"I've heard of you too."

"I was afraid of that."

"No! Nice things. . . ."

"Really?" Longworth seemed surprised. "Who told you?"

She smiled.

"Honestly, I don't remember. But don't you and somebody called Darrell go about a lot with . . . Bulldog Drummond?"

"Well," said Longworth modestly, "we do, a bit."

"That must be it."

"As long as that's all, suits me!" smiled Longworth. "Here we are . . . collect your goods and chattels!"

Longworth paid off the taxi. Then, followed by the girl, he led the way to the door of Drummond's flat, and knocked. Almost at once, Peter Darrell opened it.

"Cynthia Evershed . . . Peter Darrell, but you don't need to pay much attention to him," laughed Longworth. "Come on in and meet the big boy!"

He held open the door of the inner room, and the girl passed through.

"Hugh, meet Cynthia."

"No wonder you've been so long!" said Hugh Drummond, with a pleasant laugh. "I said he was a streak of impertinence, didn't I, Miss Evershed . . .?"

"We haven't been long!" indignantly denied Algy Longworth. "She had a taxi waiting, and we drove off at once!"

"Without even trying for a date?" murmured Darrell.

The girl smiled.

"You know him very well!" she said quietly. "There was some mention of next Tuesday. . . ."

Her words delighted Hugh Drummond and Peter Darrell: but Algy Longworth, after a glance at his watch, coughed importantly.

"Hugh . . . !"

"Yes, Algy ?"

"Cynthia doesn't like Jenner, and I promised she wouldn't meet him. . . ."

The girl saw Hugh Drummond also glance at his watch, and immediately become serious.

"Right, Algy ! Miss Evershed, that being the case, I'm afraid we shall have to move you on in a few minutes . . . but you're quite safe for a quarter of an hour. In that time I want to ask you some leading questions, and please understand that I wouldn't bother you with such inquisitiveness if the matter were not urgent, and important . . . as I told you on the telephone. I am already in your debt for accepting my word so readily then, and agreeing to rush here. I hope you will continue to trust me. . . ."

She looked at him steadily.

"What's it all about ?"

"That," said Drummond quickly, "would take too long to tell you now. But when I said we'd have to move you on, I didn't mean out of our . . . out of our sphere of influence ? I want you to go with Peter Darrell and let him give you a cocktail until we join you . . . for dinner, I hope. You'll find him less of a handful than Algy !"

"I think I'm mad," said the girl, with a laugh. "But . . . all right. But I warn you, if this is a game, then I really will get mad !"

Just for a second, an odd expression, almost of pain, flashed in and out again of Drummond's eyes.

"It's no game !" he said seriously. "First, what do you know of Henry Mason ?"

Watching her very closely, Hugh Drummond detected an instant's hesitation before she replied.

"Not a great deal. When I was in Switzerland just before the war, he . . . he made a fuss of me."

"Were you engaged ?"

"No."

"Near thing?"

"Not on my side."

"Thank you." Hugh Drummond smiled quickly, that attractive smile which always swept away any resentment at apparent impertinences. "Sorry to be so horribly inquisitive. . . ."

"That's all right—you said it was important."

"Thank you again!" Drummond was obviously pleased. "Anything else about him, anything special . . . ?"

"I'm afraid not. I only saw him during that holiday, and I've never seen him since."

"I see. Now what about Jenner?"

Drummond noted an unnaturally cold expression creep into her usually gay eyes.

"He's a beast!"

"I rather thought so, too. But what sort of a beast?"

"He's Henry's step-father. He thinks all women—specially anyone who has any sort of looks—fair game. He terrified me."

"That was during that pre-war holiday?"

"Yes. But I've seen him since. . . ."

She paused: her face was troubled.

"Go on . . ." said Drummond gently.

"He came to the hotel three days ago. I couldn't refuse to see him: I was sitting in the lounge and he just walked in. He asked me where Henry was: of course I didn't know. He didn't believe me, and he threatened me. I was frightened, and suddenly I think he believed me, because he kissed me—I couldn't stop him!—and just walked out . . . as abruptly as he had come in."

"I see. . . ."

Hugh Drummond was suddenly absorbed in thought. Algy Longworth looked at his watch again, and frowned.

"Hugh . . ."

Drummond looked at him quickly, and Longworth indicated his watch. Drummond nodded.

"Miss Evershed, as I said before, I'm grateful. Now will you let Peter entertain you for a little while? If you don't want to meet Jenner—and I think you'd better not—it's time you went : we expect him here in a few minutes. We'll join you as soon as we are able. . . ."

"Of course."

"On your way, Peter !"

Darrell left the room with the girl. As soon as they were gone, Longworth turned to Drummond.

"Pippin, isn't she ?"

"Peach !" said Drummond. "But not much help, except that she's confirmed all Jenner said. I don't like it, Algy !"

"Neither do I, Hugh !" said Longworth in a disappointed voice. "Looks as if our most promising little adventure was disintegrating in our faces as we watch."

"Scarcely that !"

"Eh ? Why not ?"

"Because," said Hugh Drummond quietly, "Henry Mason was killed, in my bedroom, even before you left the flat. While we were talking to Jenner, in fact."

"Great galloping Scot !"

"Exactly."

"He's got a gilt-edged alibi !"

"Jenner ? Yes. To my mind rather too gilt-edged."

"What have you done about it ?"

"Arranged for the arrival of the police and Jenner simultaneously. If I'm not much mistaken, that sounds like one or other of them now. But I do wish old McIver were available. . . ."

"I say," said Longworth eagerly, "can I have a look ?"

Hugh Drummond was already moving towards the window.

"Yes, Algy. But just open the door . . . don't go in and touch anything. . . ."

"Right—oh!"

Hugh Drummond, standing by the curtain, saw the Packard pull up in the street, and saw Jenner leave it. As he did so, four men left another car and followed him into the house. Drummond smiled to himself.

"I say, Hugh!"

There was an awed tone in Algy Longworth's voice which made Hugh Drummond turn back towards the room instantaneously.

"Yes, Algy?"

"You said in here?"

"Well, of course."

"There's no one here. . . ."

"Don't be an ass, Algy. Lying on the floor by the window. . . ."

"Hugh!" said Longworth, in a whisper. "I tell you . . . there's no one in the room."

Hugh Drummond ran to the door being held open by Algy Longworth, and looked quickly through. There was no sign of anyone in the room. There was no sign of any stain on the carpet. The window was shut.

There was suddenly a loud knock on the outer door.

Quietly, Hugh Drummond closed the door of the bedroom.

"Things move, Algy! I think we're going to have that adventure after all!" He laughed abruptly, a soft gay sound. "But just for the moment we're in for an awkward interview! Open up, old pal . . . this is indeed open house to-night!"

5: IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND SUFFERS FRUSTRATION

HUGH DRUMMOND was for ever afterwards inclined to voice the opinion that the next hour, after the events just related, was about the worst which he was called on to experience. There were many infinitely more dangerous, but there was none in which the sense of frustration was so complete.

He first introduced the man Jenner to the representatives of Scotland Yard. He then handed out, assisted by a somewhat apprehensive Algy Longworth, pints of beer . . . remarking that all present, including himself, were undoubtedly going to need them. When they had all sampled the refreshment, he told his tale as briefly as possible, and having concluded with Longworth's startling discovery of the disappearance of the body, he invited the police to examine his bedroom, when he suggested that they would without question find some trace of the happenings which he had just described, some evidence which would confirm his tale.

No one spoke when he had finished. Jenner rather elaborately selected a cigarette from his case, lighted it with a gold lighter, and in an unpleasantly ostentatious way settled in his chair to enjoy the smoke. He said nothing, but his whole attitude advertised a total disbelief.

The Inspector in charge of the little group from Scotland Yard—a man of obviously keen intelligence, if inclined to make too sure that his gifts were fully appreciated—drained his tankard and stood up.

"I'm afraid, Captain Drummond, I rather wish Inspector McIver were not otherwise engaged."

He said nothing more for the moment, and Hugh

Drummond found himself fervently echoing that wish. McIver, at any rate, was a friend : and he would have known that Drummond was not given to flights of the imagination. It was horribly clear that this officer who was replacing him found the story altogether unconvincing. . . .

"However," suddenly said the Inspector, "your reputation is such that I must take the extraordinary tale you have just told seriously. I must warn you, however, that if we find nothing corroborative . . . I shall have to report the whole affair to the Commissioner. And he is not, at the moment, at all disposed to enjoy anything in the nature of a practical joke."

"Neither am I," said Jenner flatly.

"And, curiously enough," remarked Drummond firmly, "I can say exactly the same."

"Very well. But, before we start . . . you're quite sure you have nothing else to say?"

Hugh Drummond looked at him coldly.

"What exactly d'you mean by that?"

"Well, if we find nothing . . . we'll have wasted a lot more time. . . ."

Watching him closely, Algy Longworth saw a very slight flush come to Drummond's face. It was momentary, and it would only have been noticeable to someone who knew the big man intimately. But in that moment Longworth wondered if the next happening of that evening of weird happenings might not be the abrupt and uncontrolled descent, at speed, of an Inspector of Scotland Yard thrown down the stairs. You could say almost anything to Drummond, reflected Longworth, except to cast a slur on his integrity. In one way, from the point of view of pure personal satisfaction, Longworth rather hoped that this might come about . . . he was rather more angry than Drummond himself.

But one of Hugh Drummond's greatest qualities was

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to be able to see the other fellow's point of view. He abruptly laughed, a gay, infectious sound.

"Carry on, Inspector. I simply can't believe that they—whoever they may be—have left no trace. . . ."

Jenner smiled, an unpleasant, humourless smile. Algy Longworth found himself longing to hit the tall, saturnine man. Found himself, actually, rather longing to hit anything. . . .

"You persist in this story?"

"I do, Inspector. I have no choice: it's true."

"Very well."

The Inspector gave his subordinates the necessary instructions. They went to work: but Hugh Drummond's intuition told him that they went to work unwillingly. He found himself imagining that they occasionally and deliberately caught his eye, as if to say: haven't you read the papers lately? Haven't you seen that there's a crime wave on? This is a very poor sort of joke, Captain; we're surprised at you! Definitely anti-social, wasting our time for a mis-fired laugh, when there's so much useful work we might be doing. . . . Hugh Drummond dolefully helped himself to some more beer, and perhaps for the first time in his life forgot to offer his guests some more at the same time. . . .

"Inspector!" suddenly said Jenner.

"Yes, sir?"

"Whatever you may do, I shall report this."

"I'm not surprised."

"It seems to me to be aiding and abetting in the escape of a homicidal lunatic."

"Quite."

"Is that a crime in this country?"

"If deliberate . . . yes."

"Nothing could be quite as deliberate as this, could it?"

The Inspector hesitated: it was quite clear to

Drummond that he was longing to agree. But the training of many years prevented him.

"We mustn't go too fast, Mr. Jenner. Our investigation may substantiate Captain Drummond's story."

Jenner laughed, a dry, cynical laugh which caused Algy Longworth to make a quick movement towards him. But Drummond soothingly put his hand on Longworth's arm, and Jenner noticed nothing.

"Is there any need for me to wait, Inspector?"

"No, Mr. Jenner. I take it you deny the Captain's allegations about the car?"

"Of course. I have already explained all that to Captain Drummond, who for some reason of his own refuses to believe me. . . ."

"Perhaps you could call in at the Yard to-morrow?"

"I'll be there first thing in the morning," said Jenner grimly. He rose to his feet slowly, rather impressively.

"We shall meet again, Captain Drummond, when I give evidence against you. I cannot congratulate you on your sense of humour. It is a criminal thing to waste the time of the police—except possibly on boat-race night—and it is also a crime to assist, if I may say so in such an unintelligent manner, a dangerous mad-man to escape. If he kills, you will be responsible. I pray that we may catch up with him before he has the opportunity. I must now warn that poor girl. . . ."

"Miss Evershed?"

Jenner looked at Drummond quickly.

"Yes."

"I've done that."

Algy Longworth only just stopped the roar of laughter which surged within him. She had been warned, yes; but in quite a different manner to that suggested. . . .

For a few seconds Jenner stared intently at Hugh Drummond; then he smiled coldly.

"In that case, I can congratulate you on doing something sensible for the first time."

"Just before you go, Mr. Jenner," said Hugh Drummond easily, "d'you mind telling me one thing? Just exactly how well do you know McIver?"

Jenner laughed: and for the first time the sound denoted real amusement.

"No doubt he will inform you personally on his return."

Jenner left the room.

Drummond and Longworth found themselves alone, for the Inspector had gone to supervise the work of his men in the bedroom. They stared seriously at each other for a moment, and then Longworth saw the lazy, good-natured smile, normally never far from Hugh Drummond's face, slowly return.

"Bit sticky, eh, Algy?"

"You bet it is."

"I don't bet on certainties." Drummond laughed.

"The only thing is, nothing seems to be a certainty nowadays."

"Not around here, anyway."

"Will they find anything, I wonder? It's going to be darned awkward if they don't, Algy . . . and I've got a funny feeling that they won't. . . ."

Algy Longworth impatiently lighted a cigarette.

"But, Hugh, you said there was blood all round his head?"

"I did, and there was, or I'm a Dutchman."

"You're not a Dutchman."

"That is my impression."

"So there was, and if there was, they're bound either to find traces of it, or of what they washed it off with. . . ."

"They?"

"Yes. Jenner's gang."

Hugh Drummond laughed again.

"Thanks, Algy. Not that I'd expect anything else from you, still your faith is encouraging. But does anything strike you about Jenner?"

"Bad type."

"Agreed. Anything else?"

"Conceited."

"Yes, but with something to be conceited about, don't you think?"

"Efficient?"

"That's the horrible word. And, like all efficient people, confident."

"It's dangerous to be over-confident."

"But is he over-confident at this stage? It doesn't look like it. He's known to Scotland Yard: this inspector johnny is almost deferential. He left this flat without a doubt in his heart, of that I'm most uncomfortably certain. Would he have done so, crowing over me—it amounted to that, and frankly I don't like the attitude—if he hadn't *known* there would be nothing in the bedroom to corroborate my story?"

"I suppose not," admitted Longworth unhappily.

Hugh Drummond abruptly made a warning gesture.

"Here they come!" he whispered. "Look out for storms."

The Inspector, followed by his subordinates, returned to the room. The Inspector, looking fierce and unsmiling, waited for his men to pass through and leave the flat. Then he turned to Drummond.

"Captain Drummond," he said coldly, "there is nothing in that room to suggest that anyone other than yourself has recently occupied it. There is no sign of anything unusual in the rug by the window. There are no distinguishable fingerprints on the window itself, or on the window sill. We have taken certain samples of dust which will be analysed at the Yard, but I want to warn you that I don't think anything bearing on your story will come of that. Do you want to say anything more?"

"Yes, Inspector. Who is this man Jenner?"

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"Inspector McIver will be back to-morrow, and he may or may not choose to tell you himself. But it may interest you to know McIver left instructions we were to help him all we could, if he applied for help."

"Good night!" ejaculated Algy Longworth incredulously.

"What?"

"Nothing, Inspector."

"I hope it will be a good night, Mr. Longworth. And for you too, Captain Drummond. As I told you before, the Commissioner is in no mood to laugh at practical jokes. And I shouldn't be surprised if he wanted to see both you gentlemen, and Mr. Darrell, to-morrow."

He turned on his heel, and a few seconds later they heard the front door of the flat close behind him none too gently.

"Crikey!" said Algy Longworth. "What happens now?"

Hugh Drummond surprisingly gave vent to a great roar of laughter.

"I don't see there's anything to laugh at!" grumbled Longworth. "Unless, of course, you want a sojourn as the guest of His Majesty!"

"Don't you see?" laughed Drummond. "The police won't believe us, so we're free!"

"Free?" murmured Longworth gloomily. "At the moment, yes . . . but for how long? That Inspector had a dirty look in his eye."

"Oh, don't worry about him! I'll fix it with the Commissioner! Good lord, Algy, cheer up! Free it is!"

There was something infectious about Hugh Drummond's gaiety.

"All right, we're free!" smiled Longworth, in spite of himself. "So what?"

"For about the first time—because the police won't believe us—we're justified in acting alone . . . getting it?"

"Ye Gods!" Longworth was really excited now. "We can get after that blighted Jenner?"

"Get after him, and get our own back! Come on, Algy: the old hat and stick! Let's see what that girl's got to tell us! Plenty, by way of background, I should think. . . ."

"Tally-ho!" responded Longworth lustily. "Half a tick—I've lost my umbrella—ah—crisis over, let's go!"

6: IN WHICH THE TOAST IS IRMA PETERSON

WHEN they had finally dropped Cynthia Evershed back at her hotel—after a dinner which would have done credit to the admirable Louis of Ciro's before the war, but only, of course, as a light bite of supper—the three were still in exalted mood, although the girl had frankly been disappointing. Not in her looks or her charm: that was a practically constant feature of Cynthia Evershed, and she had endeared herself to them all by her vivacity and good companionship: to Algy Longworth in particular because of her capitulation on the question of a date for Tuesday evening, and that in the face of hot opposition. But her information with regard to the unpleasant Jenner had been slender in the extreme. He had appeared, when she had known him, to be a man with plenty of money to throw about, which he threw about with a good deal of ostentation. He had been ungallant—and stupid—in his apparent belief that this display would buy him

anything, and excused any conduct. But what he did with his life, or what he had done to make the wealth with which he so displeasingly swaggered, was not something which she could explain.

She had taken the news of Henry Mason's death with surprising calm. She had explained this away with a very candid description of their small affair before the war : she had been very young, and he had been well placed to give her a grand time on her first holiday abroad. For a day or two, perhaps, she had found him attractive : but then far too possessive. If there had been any love, it was entirely on his side. As long as he had wanted nothing but friendship, well and good : but when his demands had become tiresome, she had thrown him over. Indeed, for the last two or three days of her holiday in Switzerland, she had avoided him assiduously. To be frank, Cynthia Evershed had stated, she could well imagine the youth growing up remarkably like his stepfather in character.

The mother ? She had never met her.

All the same, Drummond had reminded her, the lad had been killed. That is, if you were in the minority and accepted the evidence of his—Drummond's—eyes. And, what was much more, killed in a cold-blooded, horribly intelligent manner which had made Drummond look an ass—a small matter—but, much worse, had thrown dust in the august and usually keen eyes of Scotland Yard. And in a manner which clearly indicated deep planning, and necessitated the use of a band of satellite thugs . . . not to say a murder gang. Why had he been killed ? But Miss Evershed was unable to help, and knew nothing of the alleged homicidal tendencies of the youth who had once made advances to her. . . .

When, finally, they had bidden their attractive guest good night, Hugh Drummond and his two companions repaired to his flat for the final stoup of ale.

"Boys!" said Drummond seriously, when the tankards were full and the cigarettes alight. "This is a conference!"

Darrell and Longworth glanced at each other with satisfaction: it was a tremendous thing to these two to see their undisputed leader in such a mood. They had almost given up hope that anything would turn up to disturb the loathsomely controlled tenor of their post-war lives, and both were sensing that lovely slightly sick feeling when anticipation makes the world rotate a trifle faster.

"Aye, aye, captain!"

"First, where are we?"

"You may well ask!" grinned Longworth. "One foot in gaol!"

Drummond laughed.

"The way to look at it," he stated, "is one foot out of gaol!"

"And a cornless wonder at that!" murmured Darrell.

"We've been led up the garden path good and proper!"

"Limping slightly."

"Shut up, Algy!"

"Sorry, old bird!"

"I should say, to the end of the garden and right into the rose-bed!" said Darrell thoughtfully.

Hugh Drummond's face lit up.

"How right you are, Peter! The rose-bed, with all its thorns—but with a fascinating scent as well!"

"Scent?" Longworth looked gloomy. "I don't smell any . . ."

"No nose!" commented Drummond briefly. "Of course Jenner's left a scent—and he could scarcely have left a stronger one—himself! Listen, chaps . . . we're agreed that Henry Mason came to us in fear of his life?"

"Yes," said Longworth.

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But Darrell, the pedant, demurred slightly.

"He didn't exactly come to us, Hugh . . . we picked him up, practically literally."

"Amendment accepted. We're agreed that he had just been darned nearly destroyed by Jenner?"

"We are."

"We're agreed that Jenner followed him to this flat?"

"Yes."

"And that Jenner knew that if he was admitted, Mason would be hidden during his visit?"

"Yes."

"Are we agreed that Jenner talked to us here for long enough to enable his thugs to accomplish what he himself had failed to do. . . ."

"Destroy Mason?" said Darrell quietly. "Yes."

"Thus establishing a remarkably safe alibi for himself."

"The sort of alibi," said Longworth thoughtfully, "I've always dreamed about. . . ."

"Keep your blonde troubles out of it!" commented Darrell severely.

"We were then given a glimpse of the body so that we should call the police."

"We were."

"And it was then removed, through the window and down the fire-escape, and everything straightened up, so that we should look fools when the sleuths arrived."

Hugh Drummond looked at his two companions a trifle doubtfully, but they both nodded in agreement.

"I can't see any other possible reason," said Drummond thoughtfully. "It was a grave risk—the greatest they ran, in many ways. But if it was only to make us look absurd, and undergo what I am quite sure will be a highly unpleasant interview to-morrow, why run such an added risk when the aim and object had already been achieved?"

The telephone bell rang so unexpectedly that it quite startled all three of them. Hugh Drummond answered it, and beyond giving his name, remained silent listening to his caller. A slow smile spread over his face, and he replaced the receiver with the curt acknowledgment of a message received.

He turned to his friends.

"We've got a date to-morrow, chaps. Ten sharp, Commissioner's office. Apparently he's livid, and just longing to tear us apart limb by limb, with a vicious twist thrown in here and there for good measure. And the Inspector johnny definitely informs me that the only indication of any other person bar myself who has been in my bedroom suggests a brunette who uses dark face-powder!"

"Bother!" smiled Algy Longworth. "That's Phyllis, of course. I wish he'd found . . ."

But a well-directed cushion put him temporarily out of verbal action.

"It does seem a bit over the odds," mused Peter Darrell, "what you were just saying, I mean. The objective, on Jenner's part, was to kill Henry Mason. He achieved that objective in a masterly manner, forcing us to be the witnesses to his alibi. Why, then, go on to the rest . . .?"

There was a pause. Hugh Drummond looked from one to the other hopefully, but both seemed to be lost in thought, wrestling with a problem which appeared to be insoluble.

"I wonder if you're both looking at it from too complicated a point of view . . ." he ventured at last.

"Eh?" Algy Longworth looked up quickly. "But it is complicated!"

"Very," agreed Drummond, "if you are trying to make the events after Henry Mason's death benefit the crime as a crime. But supposing the disappearance

of the body had nothing to do with the crime, had in fact the simple reason I've already given . . . ? ”

“That it was done just to score off us ? ”

“Exactly.”

“But who would want so much to do that ? ” asked Algy Longworth, in an almost offended tone of voice.

“At such a ridiculously added risk . . . ” said Darrell.

“Hugh, it don't make sense ! ”

“Unless . . . ” said Drummond, and paused.

Algy Longworth suddenly sat bolt upright.

“Hugh ! You can't mean it ! ”

Something of his obvious excitement communicated itself to Darrell ; and as it did so, he abruptly realised the thought that had caused Longworth nearly to spill his beer.

“Hugh ! Surely not . . . ? ”

“Well, chaps,” said Hugh Drummond lightly, “Jenner has no particular grudge against us. As a matter of fact, he has a good deal to be grateful to us for : we were almost too darned willing to provide his alibi ! But supposing—just supposing, mind—that Jenner were working for somebody else ? Somebody with rather a nice if warped sense of humour, and quite a considerable grudge . . . ? ”

“I daren't say the name ! ” burst out Longworth.

“There are other features which, to my mind, seem to fit. This whole performance has been pretty big . . . conceived in a big way, carried out in a big way . . . and damnably efficiently. It rather bears the stamp of a certain old acquaintance of ours. . . . ”

“Oh, *Hugh* ! ” ejaculated Peter Darrell.

“The trouble is,” went on Drummond smoothly, “that I appreciate at least one of my weaknesses : I am so anxious to meet a certain lady again, and rid the world of her pestilential, if attractive, presence—and incidentally get a bit of my own back for the way in which she continues to elude and fool me in the

final stages of all our encounters—that I am apt to read her presence or her hand in everything unusual that may happen to me. . . .”

“But, Hugh!” Algy Longworth had risen in his excitement. “It fits!”

“Everything about it fits!” Darrell backed him up.

“Making us her pawn’s alibi!” went on Longworth.

“And then making perfect asses of the three of us!” concluded Darrell.

Hugh Drummond, his back to the fireplace, smiled affectionately at both of them: it did his heart good to have such vivid proof that they so completely shared with him this longing to come to grips with his arch enemy, the woman who had so nearly and so frequently brought his life to an abrupt ending, the woman who concealed under such an attractive exterior the complete embodiment of evil, the woman who was, perhaps, the most bitter and most powerful enemy of law and order in the world.

Then, abruptly, Hugh Drummond lifted his tankard.

“It’s time you were off to bed, boys. Otherwise we’ll have to sleep too quickly. Remember, we’ve an important appointment at ten to-morrow. But I’ll give you just one toast before you go. Here’s to Irma Peterson, the world’s most attractive woman we can do without most well.”

They drank in silence. And Darrell and Longworth left the flat without further conversation, for it was obvious to both of them that Hugh Drummond was fast forgetting their presence, and losing himself in thought.

But they left cheerfully, riding on very high hopes for the future . . . the near future. . . .

7: IN WHICH INSPECTOR McIVER IS SYMPATHETIC

THE Commissioner received the three punctually at the appointed hour. He was firm but surprisingly friendly. His whole attitude was more of the disappointed guardian than the infuriated prefect, but what he had to say was clear enough.

"Hugh," he started off, "I dismiss at once the idea that this affair is a practical joke. I most sincerely hope I am right . . . ?"

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"Very definitely."

"The only other conclusion is that you have made a surprising mistake."

"Or that I may have been right."

The Commissioner shook his head sadly.

"Impossible," he said curtly. "Quite impossible : you must see that ! The happenings you have described could not have occurred without leaving some trace . . . not when my men were on the spot so soon afterwards. I'll grant you that it is conceivable that all traces of such a crime could be removed from a room . . . but not in a matter of half an hour."

"That is the official opinion ?"

"It is. And one which, I take leave to say, is also the commonsense opinion."

Drummond smiled pleasantly.

"Just as you say."

The Commissioner sighed.

"You don't sound convinced. As a matter of fact, I never expected such a horribly pig-headed chap to be. But . . ."

He paused : he did not seem very much to relish

what he now had to say. Abruptly he handed round a box of cigarettes, and he did not speak again until his own was lighted. Hugh Drummond watched him closely, a very faint smile on his lips.

"But I must make something quite clear. If you had been literally anybody else, I would have felt bound to take very severe measures. Our position just now is not pleasant: we are expected to do our duty to the public, at a time when violent crime is on the increase, with less than our full complement of trained men. Any waste of their time is, frankly, not only anti-social, but something of a tragedy. I do not use too strong a word."

He paused again; he was obviously searching for his words.

"However, Hugh, you have done great service in the past, you and these two pirates of yours. . . ."

Algy Longworth sat up.

"Pirate? Here, I say . . . !"

But with a smile and a gesture, the Commissioner silenced him.

"And I know just how the three of you must be feeling in these dull times. But don't go looking for trouble, please: by doing so, you are only making trouble for me. I am perfectly prepared, therefore, to forget the whole matter, and I sincerely hope you are too . . . shall we leave it at that?"

He rose to his feet, beaming; he was obviously delighted to have finished with an unpleasant task. Hugh Drummond thanked him, and led his two friends from the room.

"I say, Hugh. . . ."

Darrell's voice was soft. Drummond smiled to him: evidently he had a good idea of what was coming.

"Well, Peter?"

"Practical joke, yes. It just might have been. But mistake . . . that's not on. A chap like you

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seeing things which aren't there . . . well, I mean to say . . . !”

“I know, Peter.” Drummond gently led him down the passage. “But he was trying to be nice without letting his own chaps down. And, anyway, as I said to Algy last night, now . . . *we're free to act alone!*”

There was a real note of exultation in his gentle voice : but it was gone as he continued in the quiet authoritative tone which never failed to thrill Darrell and Longworth, for it always denoted orders . . . and action.

“Hop down and hang about outside with Algy. Out of the way, of course. Wait for me, but if Jenner comes out before I do, Algy must follow him and report his movements to the flat by telephone. You may not have long to wait, as he's in here now, waiting to see the big boy. All set ?”

“Contact,” said Darrell briefly, taking Longworth by the arm, and leaving Hugh Drummond in the passage.

Drummond smiled to himself as they went : how helpful it was to be able to rely on two quick-witted henchmen so completely ! Then he turned, and made his way to a room which he knew well. He knocked, and entered.

“Good morning, Mac !”

Inspector McIver looked up from his papers, and laughed a greeting.

“Good morning, Captain. I hear you're in trouble again.”

Hugh Drummond sank into the Inspector's only arm-chair.

“I've just been told off.”

“I trust you're feeling chastened.”

“He was very nice to me.”

“He always is,” said McIver quietly, “but he means what he says, and it's worth while remembering that fact.”

"Now don't you start!" Hugh Drummond grinned.
"Mac, do you believe I'm subject to hallucinations?"

"No," answered McIver briefly.

"So it was a practical joke . . . ?"

This time McIver hesitated.

"I don't think so. . . ."

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"You know what you're saying, I suppose?"

"Captain," said McIver, a trifle grimly, "I shall deny anything you may repeat outside this room."

"Quite. So shall I."

"There must be some other explanation."

"Yes," said Drummond thoughtfully, "but I can't think of it . . . I hurt myself seriously last night by thinking very hard, and . . . well, I can't get the girl friend out of my head!"

"Irma?"

"Who else?"

A sudden gleam came into the Inspector's eyes, but it was gone in a flash.

"Well?"

"That girl's done us dirt," stated Drummond.

"Yes," said McIver simply.

"She's about due again . . . she's been quiet for over a year. . . ."

"Yes."

"You're not very helpful."

"I will be," said McIver very grimly, "if you ever come across her again. I've thought I . . . pardon, *we* . . . had cornered her too often in the past to take any chances again. If I so much as glimpse her, I might even shoot . . . but don't tell the Commissioner!"

"Who's Jenner?" asked Drummond abruptly.

Inspector McIver smiled.

"I've been waiting for that!" he said quietly.
"Private army type."

"Eh?"

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"Useful to us during the war."

"In Switzerland?"

"Yes."

"Secret agent?"

"That sort of thing. Did enough then to make me willing to help him now."

Hugh Drummond hesitated: then he looked up at the Inspector.

"Is his story about Henry Mason true?"

McIver answered at once.

"Could be. I haven't actually checked yet, but Jenner has told me this morning that all is well, and he's found the lad. They're leaving for home by plane to-day."

"What!"

"That's what he says. . . ."

Hugh Drummond stared at the Inspector. Then he spoke very earnestly.

"Mac, am I crazy?"

"Yes," said Inspector McIver emphatically, "but in a nice enough way."

"Be serious: this is very important, Mac, you've got to check! If I'm right, *who* is he taking to Switzerland to-day. . . .?"

"Don't get excited," said Inspector McIver. "Of course your little prank was a practical joke, but I like being sure of everything. The answer to a Swiss 'phone call should be with us any moment now."

"Does the Commissioner know?"

A quick smile enlightened McIver's face.

"No. I may have to pay for this call myself!"

"If the worst comes to the worst, I'll pay half," Drummond assured him.

"Thank you," said McIver. "In so far as I am concerned, this was a practical joke, so the check on Jenner's story is purely routine. In so far as Scotland Yard was concerned, this was a practical joke . . . and

may I say, Captain Drummond, in the worst possible taste. Our Commissioner, in his great generosity, has decided to believe that you were mistaken, and say so. You were, but in your sense of humour." McIver suddenly laughed. "And in any case, I don't like seeing my friends go off their rocker without soothing them a bit."

"You're a good chap, Mac!"

"I wish my wife always thought so."

"In trouble again?"

"Not exactly. But I thought I'd help her with the ironing, and she hasn't got any new pants any more."

"Too bad."

"It isn't the expense—she informs me—it's the coupons. How's Mrs. Drummond?"

"In great heart, bless her!"

"Good. Enjoying Miss Peterson's continued absence, no doubt. . . ."

"Up to now."

"Eh?"

"You said 'continued'."

McIver smiled.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Captain."

Drummond returned his smile.

"I'll try not to, Inspector."

The telephone on the Inspector's desk buzzed, and all the lethargy disappeared, as if by magic, from the big man in the arm-chair. He sat up abruptly, and watched the Inspector as he casually lifted the receiver.

"McIver here . . . yes, go ahead. . . ."

Hugh Drummond watched the Inspector as that surprising individual impassively listened to a voice which was nothing more than an unintelligible squeak to Drummond. The one-sided conversation did not go on for very long.

"Thanks a lot."

Thoughtfully, Inspector McIver replaced the receiver. He remained for a few moments with his hand on the instrument, inscrutably turning over in his mind the information which he had just received. Then he suddenly looked straight at Drummond.

"That's the report of the check. The story Jenner told is entirely true. Mason had a go for his mother two years ago, and has been privately incarcerated until his escape a month ago. Jenner left Switzerland to chase him."

There was a long pause.

"And Jenner now says all is well, and he's taking Mason back to Switzerland to-day?" asked Drummond.

"He does."

"In spite of the fact that I saw Mason lying dead in my bedroom. . . ."

"Tut, tut, Captain Drummond!"

"But, Mac, you've said I'm not crazy!"

"God forbid! I said you didn't suffer from hallucinations."

"What do I suffer from, then?"

This appeared to be a question which the Inspector had to think over. He half closed his eyes as he stared thoughtfully at his visitor. When he spoke, it was slowly.

"I've never really known whether it was a violent form of public spiritedness, or just an insatiable curiosity run riot. Both, or either, spiced with a perfectly beastly love of dangerous adventure."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." The Inspector rose. "And, Captain, in spite of being about the busiest person in this understaffed force, I'm still always delighted to see you."

"Thanks, Mac."

"Not at all. By the way, you didn't . . . examine him, did you? I mean in your dream, of course."

There was a twinkle in his eye, and an answering smile on Drummond's face as he replied.

"Not closely. I wish I had, but he was so obviously dead—a knife stuck in his throat."

"You saw it?"

"The knife? Yes, I saw the handle, and the blood. But what's the point of talking about it? The official view is that it simply couldn't have occurred."

"Exactly. And now that Jenner is taking a hale and hearty Mason back to Switzerland by air to-day . . . ?"

He left the sentence unfinished, but there was no doubt in Drummond's mind of the implication. He laughed gaily as he also rose to his feet.

"Yes, Mac, you needn't bother. I'll give you a ring later and tell you whether or not Jenner is really taking a hale and hearty . . ."

But the Inspector cut him short.

"Northolt."

"I know."

"So long, Captain."

"So long, Mac."

Hugh Drummond left the room, and the building, quickly. He found Peter Darrell and Algy Longworth hovering unostentatiously not very far from the entrance.

"Not out yet?"

"No sign."

"Keep your eyes skinned, Algy."

"They're practically popping out of my head."

"Good. Listen, chaps. Jenner is mildly okay with McIver: reasonable war record in some Swiss hush-hush. His story of Mason is true."

"Good lord! But then . . ."

"Hold hard, Peter! Jenner has informed Mac that he's found Mason, and is returning him to Swiss store by air to-day."

"What!"

"That's what he says. Mac's attitude is far more friendly than we could have expected. He's bound to back up the official view, of course : but he obviously is suffering from his sense of duty."

"He believes you?"

"Yes, Peter."

"Good old McIver ! I'll bet he wishes he was on tap yesterday !"

"I'm sure he does, Algy . . . but now I'm darned glad he wasn't ! A free hand at last ! And with old Mac unwilling to believe the evidence of his own experts, we might not have had it. But there's an awful lot to think out in a hurry, so I'm going to use an ice-pack in the flat. Peter, go straight down to Northolt. Mingle with the passengers for Switzerland. If Jenner turns up, *make his companion speak*, even if he looks the dead spit of Henry Mason. That may provide our only clue : voices are difficult to double. Don't bother, of course, about being recognised : once they've reached the airport it doesn't matter a hoot."

"Right, Hugh."

"I don't know how many planes there are for Geneva, but if necessary you'll have to wait there all day. Original instructions remain for you, Algy."

There was no reply. Hugh Drummond looked round in surprise, and saw no one where Longworth had just been standing. But he caught sight of the tall, lanky form of Algy Longworth almost at once, walking briskly down the embankment. And on the other side of the road, the powerful figure of the man Jenner could be seen striding along purposefully.

"You hadn't countermanded them, so he assumed that the orders stood," said Darrell quietly.

"Good lad !" Drummond watched the tall Longworth affectionately for a moment. Then he turned back to Darrell. "You'd better get a move on, Peter. . . ."

"I've gone."

"Reports to the flat."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Peter Darrell moved off rapidly.

Hugh Drummond took a deep breath of sheer joy : for a ridiculous moment, he very nearly gave way to a sudden temptation to dance a solo Highland reel in the street. Action at last ! Nothing could be certain, of course, yet ; and he well knew that if this strange affair now fizzled out, then the reaction would be severe in the extreme. But surely such a promising few hours must lead to some adventure ! It all depended, of course, on the evidence of his own eyes. . . .

He walked home briskly, his brain hard at work to find the answer to a host of questions. Letting himself into his flat, he examined his bedroom meticulously for the twentieth time, paying very particular attention to his window and the fire-escape outside. But he found nothing at all that he did not know before. . . .

He looked at his watch : it was getting on for mid-day. He helped himself to a tankard of beer, and settled in a chair. Almost at once the front door bell demanded his attention.

Drummond opened the door, and found himself facing Cynthia Evershed.

"May I come in ?" she asked.

Drummond stood aside : there was something urgent and flurried about her manner. As soon as he had closed the door behind them, she rummaged in her handbag and produced an envelope.

"That came this morning," she said quietly. "I've brought it as soon as I could. . . ."

He took it, and noted that it was addressed to her, and carried a London post-mark of the day before.

"Read it," she told him.

Hugh Drummond took out the letter, and looked

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first at the signature. The name Henry Mason seemed to jump at him. Quickly he turned the paper over.

"Darling," he read, "I hope you don't mind my still calling you darling : it's probably for the last time. What follows may sound mad, but I swear it's true. I swear it, Cynthia, and I'm relying on you. Jenner is going to kill me : even in England I don't think I'll be able to avoid it. I haven't come near you because he's almost bound to try to trace me through you. If you hear that I'm dead—surely in England all murders do get into the papers, and after you've got this you'll be on the look-out—take this to Hugh Drummond. Yes, the famous Bulldog. Implore him, make him, go to Vevey and find my mother—but watch out for Jenner. She can explain, and if she knows I'm dead, she will. It's no good going to the police : Jenner's too clever. And I want to be avenged. But tell Drummond there's much more in this than merely that.

"You've got to make him go, Cynthia. Surely you can, with your beauty and attraction. This thing is horrifying and much too big.

"My love as always,

"Henry Mason."

Hugh Drummond looked up at the girl. She was pale, and her expression was worried : but she still looked very lovely. He admired most, however, her obvious self-control.

"As you know, Captain Drummond, I didn't like him much. But that . . . that's an appeal, and I . . . we were friends once. And after last night . . ."

Hugh Drummond made up his mind.

"Is that his writing?"

She smiled.

"Yes. I'd kept a note or two he'd sent me, and I've compared them with this. It is his writing."

She began to look in her bag again, but Drummond stopped her.

"No need to show them to me!" he said, and noted the relief on her face: Drummond told himself that private sentimental notes were dear to a girl, and that she had been brave to offer to produce one.

From his pocket he took the sheet torn from his notebook by Mason on the previous day. Quickly he compared the writing with that of the letter. Certain mannerisms of the handwriting told him that they obviously had been written by the same man.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He looked at her for a moment, and then smiled encouragingly.

"Cynthia, I'm not going to let him down. But Algy will keep you informed on . . . Tuesday evening, isn't it?"

"Is that all you'll tell me?"

"For the moment, yes. I'll keep this, if you don't mind."

"Of course."

She left him then, rather unwillingly, he thought, but he was grateful to her for her control of her natural curiosity. Hugh Drummond sauntered back to his armchair, and took a drink from his tankard. Then he seemed to lose himself in thought.

A few minutes later, he began to whistle. As usual, not melodiously, but it would have seemed sheer heavenly music to either Darrell or Longworth, could they have heard him. For when Hugh Drummond whistled, things were apt to happen.

8: IN WHICH THE DEAD
COMES TO LIFE

IT was at about the hour for the short ones, if there is any gin in the house, that Peter Darrell and Algy Longworth returned to the flat together, ready to make their reports. Except to feed, Hugh Drummond had not gone out : he had spent most of the day in deep thought, although for nearly an hour after lunch sleep had supervened. He was glad to see them, and subconsciously both Darrell and Longworth noted that there was a quiet, settled look in the lazy eyes of the big man, a look which the recent surprises had rather driven away. But neither were in the mood to surmise on this welcome sign, for both were bursting with their news.

Hugh Drummond, noting their eagerness, smiled.

"Algy first," he said. "Let's keep the saga of Mr. Jenner in its proper order."

"Hugh," began Longworth, speaking quickly, "I may be a bit rusty, but I swear I followed the gent with a modicum of skill ! I'm prepared to bet that no ordinary person would have known there was someone trailing him : after all, the science, once learnt, is not easily forgotten. . . ."

"Like riding a bicycle," suggested Darrell with a grin.

"Shut up, Peter : this needs concentration. Jenner, made the job much easier by walking the whole way . . . to the Savoy. He popped into the hotel, and I popped in after a suitable interval, during which I'm afraid I rather intrigued the door fellow by peeping through the glass, even taking one or two circular journeys in the revolving door.

"I got into the lounge just when he disappeared into the lift to go upstairs. A few discreet enquiries established the fact that Mr. Jenner, apparently an honoured guest, had a room on the fourth floor, but was leaving the premises after an early lunch: a car had been ordered to take him to Northolt. These enquiries took me a little time, of course, and just as I was thinking that I'd better get me a sandwich or something unless I wanted to suffer those nasty aching pains so easily caused by a void in the tum-tum, and possibly had also better hire me another car to make sure of following Jenner's, a uniformed chappie who'd been hovering about with a little silver salver, settled on me. He established that my name was Longworth, and presented the salver. There was a note on it, addressed to me. I gave the chappie sixpence, which didn't seem to satisfy him as he withdrew with his nose pointing to the ceiling, and . . . here's the note, Hugh."

Drummond took the small piece of paper.

"Dear Mr. Longworth," he read aloud. "Don't bother to wait. I'm leaving for Northolt in time to catch Swiss-Air home early this afternoon. So, if you insist, either meet me there, or at any rate, save yourself the boredom of the lounge for the next hour. You can't get draught beer at the hotel bar, but there's a splendid pub just down the steps by the theatre."

Peter Darrell made a sound which was suspiciously like a minor giggle. But there was no smile on Hugh Drummond's face, as he folded the paper and put it away in his note-case.

"Well worth sixpence, Algy: I agree with the uniformed chappie: you underpaid him. I'm all for fellows who commit themselves to paper. It nearly always argues over-confidence. Go on, old bird . . ."

"I was sorely tempted to go after that beer!"

continued Longworth, "but I just managed to resist the frightful temptation, and having ordered a car to come round at once and wait—sorry, Hugh, it cost a fortune—I sat down to wait with a sandwich and pale ale—very pale—which comparatively cost even more. I was there, I suppose, slightly over the hour when the lift doors opened and out came our pal. There seemed no point in hiding behind the lunch-time edition of the evening paper, so I just looked at him. And then I noticed that he was not alone, that he was helping a chap along by the arm."

Algy Longworth paused: he looked seriously at Hugh Drummond.

"I say, Hugh," he said suddenly, "has your heart ever stopped beating? Mine did in that moment. Stock still, it stood. You see, the chap was Henry Mason."

"Was Henry Mason?"

"Well . . . the dead spit of him. I hope I never see a ghost, because it's going to make one of me straight away. Then, as they passed me, Jenner suddenly looked at me and smiled. I didn't like that smile, and that's what pulled me together: it was a nasty, triumphant smirk. I stood up, but they just went on, through the doors, and into a car which was drawn up ready. Then, with the usual bowing and scraping of the upturned hand staff, the car drove off. I need beer."

Darrell ministered to his needs.

"Of course I leapt into my barouche, and told the driver to follow Jenner's. I didn't tell him to keep his distance: there seemed no point. I just told him not to lose sight of the car in front at any cost. I think the driver began to see himself on the pictures. Thanks, Peter."

Longworth took a soothing drink.

"During the journey down I began to wonder a bit . . ."

"Whether or not I was subject to hallucinations?" smiled Drummond.

"Well, Hugh, that did cross my mind. But I was principally interested in connecting up Henry Mason's appearance with all that we knew of Jenner. You see, although this chap was either Mason or his double, he was a very different bloke to the johnny we had last seen vertical in this room. . . ."

"Thanks for the 'vertical,' Algy." Drummond was speaking seriously. "I am honestly touched by your faith."

"Don't be absurd: Peter saw him horizontal too!" Longworth abruptly grinned. "But to get on: this johnny looked frightfully ill, far more so than Mason even in his moments of panic. It's difficult to explain, but he looked sort of . . . silly. White as a sheet, dark under the eyes, and . . . doped, that's the word. Of course, it became immediately clear that either he was Henry Mason, and you'd made a mistake, and he was practically out—say from the wound you mistook for a fatal one. . . ."

"No, Algy. People don't get only wounded when they've a knife in the windpipe!"

"Yes, I know. But either that—this was my reasoning—or it was somebody else made up to look like Mason, and made up to look like a sick Mason, which of course is much easier, and much easier for the actor concerned."

"A deep observation," commented Peter Darrell, "and as great minds think alike, I came to that conclusion too—later on."

"Don't rush your fences, Peter," Hugh Drummond laughed. "Algy's in the lead, so don't balk him! Yes, Algy?"

"There's practically nothing more to say. Jenner led me to Northolt all right, and when we arrived he solicitously walked Mason into the office place. When

I followed, I saw Peter right beyond the barrier. How did you get there, Peter ? ”

“ By making a noise like a journalist.” Peter Darrell took up the tale from Longworth, just as he had taken up the active duty at the airport. “ It was my turn, then, to get the shock of my life, Hugh ! No one had warned me that Jenner might be perambulating a ghost. I expected an impersonation, but not the exact replica. Did I turn pale, Algy ? ”

“ White as a sheet, old boy.”

“ I felt whiter than that. But then I noticed what Algy had noticed, that the Mason johnny was obviously in a sort of trance . . . or wanted to be thought in that condition. And I remembered my instructions from you, Hugh : make him talk.”

Peter Darrell paused, and then began to laugh helplessly. His listeners waited patiently until he had recovered.

“ The next scene was scarcely creditable to myself, but I did see the humour afterwards. . . . ”

“ Can we ? ” suggested Hugh Drummond. “ What happened, Peter ? ”

“ I had to keep up the journalist nonsense : otherwise I’d have been thrown out on my ear by a horde of already vaguely suspicious officials. So I went boldly up to Jenner, and I said ‘ Good afternoon. I represent the *Morning Sun*. ’ ‘ Not really, Mr. Darrell ? ’ he said, without batting an eyelid. ‘ Yes, I do, ’ I said firmly. ‘ How splendid, ’ he said. I felt rather flushed about the back of the neck : he had spoken loudly, and the suspicious officials were looking rather hungry : as if they’d like to start on me as an appetiser. They looked big, too, and rough. ‘ Yes, ’ I said, not being able to think of anything else to say, and then I had a real brainwave. I thought that the impostor, if he had taken the trouble to make up so well, would never be fooled into speaking by any ordinary question. The only way

to make him speak would be to surprise him into some angry comment by an unexpected rudery. So I turned and faced the chap, sudden like, and I said : ' As for you, you silly ass, how anybody could mistake you for Henry Mason, I can't think ! ' "

Hugh Drummond's huge frame began to shake. But he said no word. Algy Longworth was staring intently at Darrell.

" I got the goose-pimples then," continued Peter Darrell very seriously. " Don't forget, I was facing the johnny and staring point-blank into his eyes. Not only did he say no word, but although he was looking straight at me, I got the feeling that he wasn't seeing me : his eyes were dead. And I was fairly certain, too, that he couldn't hear me. He was leaning on Jenner's arm, and doing exactly what Jenner's arm guided him to do—nothing more. It was some sort of trance, perhaps : but it was inhuman. It was just exactly like a corpse with open eyes and the power of movement controlled by someone else, but literally nothing more. Absolutely horrible, Hugh ! I felt cold all over.

" Then Jenner took control of me as well : you see, as he was prepared to call my bluff, I was helpless. ' Mr. Darrell,' he said, and the worst thing about it all was the triumph in his voice. ' Go back to Captain Drummond and tell him not to believe everything he sees. Tell him that it can be dangerous at times . . . from me, with my love.' He said that, Hugh, in those very words : I'll never forget them ! He threatened you, the blighter ! And then he dismissed me, the blinkin' so-and-so, as easily as snap your fingers ! He said, ' And if you want to retain your job on the *Morning Sun*, get out. Editors dislike impostors, you know ! ' The cheek of it ! But what could I do ? The suspicious horde was closing in on all sides, beginning to look really tough : I'd had a frightful job to get in at all, and I don't think they'd ever been fully convinced

about me. I went. I knew I couldn't make the helpless johnny talk. I joined Algy.

"That's all, Hugh, except that we waited till the plane took off, to make quite certain that the precious pair were really travelling. They were. Then we came straight here, without even pausing for a quick one. I'm sorry : I'm afraid I've failed, but I don't think even you . . ."

"Stow it, Peter!" Hugh Drummond, grinning broadly, handed Darrell a foaming tankard. "You've told me all that I wanted to know . . . and you couldn't, either of you, have done any more. . . ."

He walked back to the barrel, and helped himself. Then, as he straightened, he turned to Longworth.

"Algy . . . get Phyllis on the 'phone, will you?"

Surprised, Longworth looked sharply at him : but he went at once to the instrument.

Hugh Drummond, smiling, went and stood with his back to the fireplace. He knew very well what effect his request must have had on Darrell and Longworth : his wife Phyllis, bless her, was always rather a brake on their adventures. In the opinion of Darrell and Longworth, she was much too apt to be careful about his—Drummond's—skin ! Hugh Drummond enjoyed the moment, and then put them out of their miserable doubts. . . .

"She's been a bit poorly lately—wants a change of scenery and air. I think a trip to Switzerland would do her a power of good. I've decided to take her. . . ."

Peter Darrell, surprise on his face, sat up.

"But, Hugh . . . what about the regulations?"

A flash of anger appeared for a moment in Hugh Drummond's usually gentle eyes.

"Rules and regulations are made to curb the wicked," he said shortly, "and deserve—if the occasion demands it—to be broken by the just. Anyway"—he grinned suddenly—"leave that to McIver and me. . . ."

IN WHICH MR. SMITH IS TAUGHT A LESSON

In the plane, swooping down now towards Geneva, Jenner leant confidentially towards his companion.

"She'll be pleased!" he said in a low voice.

"You bet!"

"He's hooked!"

"Good and proper!"

And, throwing back their heads in unison as if by order, they both vied with the roar of the engines in their laughter. . . .

9: IN WHICH MR. SMITH IS TAUGHT A LESSON

ON a lovely morning two days later, a morning full of the gaiety of blue skies and sunshine, Hugh Drummond and his wife Phyllis took to the air in a privately chartered plane, their destination Geneva. A Harley Street specialist had gladly collaborated in the question of Phyllis's health, after remarking how splendidly well she looked when she first walked into his consulting-room with her husband. Inspector McIver had undoubtedly tipped a wink or two in some useful places, and the not inconsiderable pull wielded by Hugh Drummond himself had done the rest. Their luggage was ostentatiously labelled "Hotel des Trois Couronnes, Vevey."

The aeroplane, a smart job with twin engines, could easily have carried Algy Longworth and Peter Darrell as well, and it had been noticeable that both had cast longing looks towards the spare accommodation before Drummond and his Phyllis had taken off. Longing looks, but no more, for Hugh Drummond had been very firm on the point. Indeed, he had been very firm on a good many points in those last days, and one

noticeable feature had been a reluctance to discuss the strange affair of Henry Mason with anyone at all. He seemed suddenly to have withdrawn within a protective shell of brooding silence, emerging only to assure Darrell and Longworth that they could rely on him to call upon them, as usual, when the fun really started. To them, the fun seemed to be starting with the aeroplane, but they had far too much faith in their leader ever even to question a decision when his mind was so obviously made up. One crumb of comfort was apparent, however: he had mentioned the Mason story quite openly in front of Phyllis, and she had not only appeared interested, but had said no word and made no gesture to prevent his carrying on. This was, to say the least of it, a little unusual, and in particular when Hugh Drummond had insisted on booking separate rooms in the hotel. He had said that in her "delicate state" she must not be disturbed by his restless snores. But this had been treated as the jest it was, even by Phyllis. The real reason was obvious enough: his nocturnal comings and goings in the pursuit of the truth about Mason might really be disturbing. The apparently co-operative attitude of Phyllis Drummond, when her husband was going to embark on a new adventure, was not the least of the many mysteries of those last four days.

The last words of Hugh Drummond before entering the plane were addressed to Algy Longworth.

"You've got an interim job after your own heart, Algy!" he had said. "Keep in touch with the ravishing blonde! Cynthia Evershed may hold a clue she knows nothing about. Take her out, fill her up, and give her a good time. And encourage her to talk of that pre-war holiday of hers: the more I can get on Jenner and Mason, the better I'll be pleased. Anything new to Phyllis—Phyllis, mind, not me—at the hotel at Vevey."

And with that they had been compelled to be satisfied. But it had been a depressed couple of fellows who met at the club for a snifter that evening, envying the Drummonds almost certainly then on the lovely terrace, vermouth-cassis in hand, of the Hotel des Trois Couronnes.

* * * * *

It was not at all a depressed couple of men who were admitted to a luxurious drawing-room in a fine mansion in Geneva, at about the same time. Their elegant hostess, dressed to perfection in the very latest from Paris, did not rise to meet them: she indicated two chairs with a gesture made with the long cigarette holder she affected. But they noticed her welcoming smile, and knowing her as they did, they knew that the graceful gesture was as warm a reception as a friendly handshake in another.

"You are in plenty of time, my friends . . ." she said quietly, the low, musical tones of her voice soft as silk, "but I am glad that you are early. We can have a little chat before the other arrives. . . ."

She said no more for a moment, and both men knew better than to speak without being spoken to by this rather weird woman. Jenner watched her closely, noted again her strange dark beauty, wondered for the hundredth time at the dominating personality which her femininity so effectually concealed. But Jenner had seen this woman looking very different: he had seen her in moods which struck an overwhelming terror in male or female hearts. And he knew that those moods could occur without warning, even when the moment previously she had appeared to be all charm. In his experience, this intensely intelligent lady was generous to serve provided all was going well, very generous indeed. But she just as easily could be cruelly ruthless

in adversity, and she had shown herself unwilling to accept any excuse for any failure, no matter how small. Jenner, with a slight involuntary shudder, congratulated himself that nothing had failed in his recent mission.

"Just tell me again, very briefly, your story, my good Jenner. . . ."

The request—an order—was spoken very softly indeed : there was a cold light in those dark eyes which were looking at him, and Jenner quickly dropped his gaze to his slender hands. He never liked that cold light : the whole temperature of the room seemed to fall. . . .

"It was uncommonly easy, madame. Henry here and I had timed the affair very carefully—we knew that the three were in the club. I waited in Waterloo Place until Henry gave the signal, which he did as soon as he was sure that one of them was looking out—it happened to be Darrell. Henry played the scene to perfection, and I drove away at speed."

She gave the other man a pleased smile.

"Were they kind to you?" she asked.

"Most!" agreed Henry Mason with a smile. "Forced drinks down my throat, madame!"

She laughed, and turned back to Jenner.

"Go on!" she commanded.

"Henry contrived to make them take him to their flat."

"Whose flat?"

"Hugh Drummond's. . . ."

Jenner paused : he was unable to prevent himself. Hard-bitten and tough though he liked to think himself, the sudden expression in the woman's eyes as he pronounced the name of Hugh Drummond shocked him. Jenner had seen hate before : he understood hate, and had experienced it. But he had never seen anything like the hatred shown just for a second when the mask dropped from that normally lovely face. It shook him badly : it seemed the embodiment of all

evil, it actually frightened him . . . and Jenner, to do him justice, was not accustomed to be frightened. What on earth, he asked himself, could that amiable ass Hugh Drummond have done to this woman to cause such an inhuman bitterness, such a loathing which she could not always conceal? He had heard rumours, of course : rumours were current in the circles which he frequented of the huge Englishman's astonishing luck when pitted against the best brains of the underworld. But even if Drummond had fortunately bested this woman on occasion, that was not sufficient to account for this intensity of hatred. Someone had once whispered to him a tale of a lover, a fellow called Peterson, killed by Drummond after an epic struggle, but that was years ago. . . .

"Go on . . ." said the soft voice.

Jenner quickly pulled himself together : madame was notoriously lacking in patience, and his thoughts—prompted by that momentary but startling expression on her face—had carried him away.

"I beg your pardon, madame," he went on quickly. "Henry contrived to make Drummond take him to his flat. I went there, after a suitable interval. As arranged, Henry was apparently terrified, and as we anticipated, Drummond hid him in his bedroom. There is a very convenient fire-escape leading from that bedroom.

"I interviewed the Captain. I was firm with him. I told him a true tale, of course : I only omitted that Henry Mason was now as sane as you or I. Needless to say, I did not mention that to Inspector McIver either ; he was most helpful.

"When I judged that Henry had been given sufficient time to stage his charade, I left, promising to return in an hour for my answer. Really to see if all had gone well, of course.

"The one risk we took came off : didn't it, Henry?" Mason smiled.

"Yes. He made no attempt to examine me : I don't

blame him : I must have looked an awful sight, and very, very dead."

The woman leant forward suddenly.

"How did you manage to look like that ? Drummond seldom acts unless he is sure . . . ?"

"He was sure all right, because when I returned the police arrived with me." Jenner took up the tale again. "I agree with Henry ; I don't blame Drummond. There was blood everywhere, real blood : at least, real animal's blood. And the pad which Henry had stuck on his throat, which showed the half of a dagger, showed also a dreadful wound—and there was blood on that too, plenty of it ! Henry and I had rehearsed the scene : I can assure you the sight sickened even myself ! No one could have lived with *that* done to them.

"But when the police turned up, Henry had gone. And he had taken the stained rug with him, leaving the clean duplicate, which we had purchased, in its place. That fire-escape was useful for the reconnaissance as well as for the action !

"There was no trace, of course, of Henry Mason. You should have seen the police, madame ! I very nearly laughed aloud ! I think they would have loved to arrest Drummond for wasting their time with fairy stories, or possibly for being drunk ! I've never seen a man so deflated in my life !"

He laughed loudly now, and so did Mason. But, although madame smiled, she made no sound, but waited for the conclusion of his story.

"Well," said Jenner more quietly, "that was that, of course. Drummond was completely fooled. As far as he was concerned, Mason had been foully murdered almost under his eyes. As you rightly prophesied, he took that as a personal affront. He was told off by the Commissioner the next morning—I insisted on that !—but he sent his two fools to check on my departure.

Goodness knows who they thought I was smuggling out of England, but they could do nothing, of course. Henry was then made up to look rather like a drugged caricature of himself, and their impression must have been that he was someone made up to look like Henry Mason ! Particularly as I wouldn't let him talk, just to heighten the illusion.

"That's all, madame, except that, as you know, the letter was then delivered. . . ."

"The girl ? Has she played her part ?"

"Perfectly !" Jenner laughed. "That was genius, madame ! The final proof, and as you know, Drummond has fallen for the bait. Our information is that he arrives in Switzerland to-day. . . ."

"And has booked at the Hotel des Trois Couronnes at Vevey . . ." said Mason quietly.

"So as to be near Mrs. Jenner, no doubt !" roared Jenner in a gust of laughter.

But the woman stopped his mirth abruptly, with a gesture.

"Mrs. Jenner is fully capable of playing her part ?"

"Yes, madame." Jenner spoke confidently. "Mrs. Jenner is word perfect."

"Good."

The telephone bell rang : the woman lifted the receiver.

"Yes ? . . . ah, the airport ; yes ? . . . thank you very much indeed."

She turned to the two men.

"They have arrived. They are even now on their way to the hotel at Vevey." She smiled, and they were quick to answer her smile. "You have done well, my friends : as you know, you shall not go unrewarded. Our guest is late . . . ?"

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"A little fast, madame," said Jenner, glancing at his wrist-watch, "but he should be here at any minute now. . . ."

"I want to introduce you, and then to be left alone with him."

"Yes, madame. . . ."

"But you will, of course, listen in the next room, my good Jenner. The door is just sufficiently open. . . ."

They waited in silence : madame seemed to be lost in thought. Neither of the men even considered interrupting her : madame was not one of those one interrupted lightly. But the silence was by no means uncomfortable : the success of the mission which she had entrusted to Jenner and Mason gave them many pleasant, if slightly avaricious, subjects for self-congratulatory contemplation.

They had not long to wait, for the expected visitor arrived only a few minutes behind his time. He was of medium height, rather too heavily built for his size, rather sallow of complexion, and dark. But, although obviously by nature on the serious side, when he did smile his whole face was lightened to a surprising extent. . . .

"Good evening, madame. . . ."

This time she rose to greet the newcomer, and gracefully gave him her hand. He bent over it, and then looked questioningly at the two men.

She smiled.

"This, my dear Mr. Smith, is Jenner. And that is his step-son Mason. They have most successfully brought the mission entrusted to them to a close. . . . I thought you would like, perhaps, to congratulate them. . . ."

"He is here?" eagerly asked the man to whom she had so unexpectedly referred as "Smith."

Jenner, pleased with madame's generous words, laughed.

"Yes, sir ! He's here. On his way to Vevey now !"

"On his way . . . from England?" asked the stranger suspiciously.

"He's in Switzerland," Jenner told him triumphantly.

"Landed from a plane here at Geneva a short time ago, and he's now in a car bound for the Hotel des Trois Couronnes at Vevey."

The man who called himself Smith breathed a great, whistling sigh of relief.

"What a fool the man must be!"

The woman frowned very slightly.

"He is no fool, my friend," she chided him gently. "He has merely fallen for the bait which has dangled in front of his nose, and it was a bait which he could scarcely ignore, for it was beautifully dangled! And of a nature which would be irresistible to his insatiable appetite for adventure! He is mad, if you like: but he is no fool!"

"As you will, madame!" The dark man smiled suddenly. "I have no idea how the miracle has been achieved, but I am glad . . . very glad. But . . . will he stay here, out of the way?"

"Yes," madame told him confidently. "Henry Mason here, and Mrs. Jenner, will see to that!"

"You are quite sure?"

There was almost a threat in the questioning words. The eyes of the woman went cold, and Jenner glanced at her apprehensively. But she controlled the surge of anger.

"Yes, I am quite sure."

"Good. Well, then. . . ."

Smith glanced at the two men, and madame smiled cynically.

"They are more than touched by your generous thanks for achieving your pre-requisite to our little deal!" she told him icily. But she turned at once to Jenner and Mason. "You may go: Mr. Smith is a little inarticulate, but he is grateful to you both . . . as I am."

Jenner bowed stiffly: then, followed by Mason, he left the room.

"Let me give you one small piece of advice," the woman told her guest, as soon as they were alone. "The warm Western mind reacts, to compliments, and is seldom suspicious of kindly words. You cannot drive it : you must encourage it. However . . ." she laughed merrily to herself. "I've put that right for you. Well, Mr. Smith . . . now I can start !"

"Yes," said the man thoughtfully, "now you can start. . . ."

But he relapsed into thoughtful silence for a few moments. Waiting patiently, madame watched him, a cold smile playing about her full lips. She lit a cigarette, and placed it in her long holder.

Abruptly he looked up at her.

"Madame !" he said curtly. "You referred to my pre-requisite : this has been accomplished. But I must make something else very plain . . . if, at any time while you are working in England, Captain Drummond should return to England also, then it is understood that the deal is off, and that you leave the country at once."

"Have no fear ! He will not leave Vevey."

"He will be watched."

A frown of annoyance appeared on her face : her visitor was quick to notice it.

"You cannot blame us, madame !" Without waiting any longer to be asked, he sat down in the chair opposite her. "Your record against this man is not impressive !"

"Have you come to insult me ?"

"Of course not." He spoke without hesitation, unexpectedly suavely. "We are of your opinion, as expressed to us at our first meeting, that you have been most unlucky . . . or shall we say that Drummond has had the devil's own luck ! We are convinced that you are the right person to complete our job : we would not engage you at such a monstrously high fee did we have doubts." She smiled slightly as he spoke. "But,

madame, you have one weakness . . . you hate too much ! ”

She looked at him solemnly.

“ And do you not hate as well as I do ? ”

“ Not individuals, even if they are against us. They are merely a nuisance, to be eliminated. But you hate one individual . . . Drummond. And that is a weakness, for it warps your judgment. Only thus can his success against you be explained, only thus could his weakness of intellect—no matter with all the luck in the world—succeed against your intelligence ! ”

She laughed, but it was a bitter sound. The man paid no attention to it.

“ When Drummond is in the field,” he continued quickly, “ you are apt to deviate from the straight line of your task. You are apt to think you see an opportunity for personal revenge, and to jump at it—with, up to now, disastrous consequences to the main task. This we could not risk : this we had to avoid when we decided to ask your help : that was why we made the condition that Drummond must be lured out of the country while you were at work for us in England, and kept out of the country until you had completed your task. Do I make myself clear ? ”

“ Painfully,” she told him a trifle wearily.

“ You have achieved the pre-requisite. Drummond is here. You will, I hope, consent to leave for England to-morrow, and start your work. But I must have your solemn promise that should your plans for keeping Drummond here miscarry, you will immediately drop everything, and return to report to me here . . . ? ”

“ Very well.”

“ Your solemn oath ? ”

“ Oh, *yes*. . . .”

He did not pursue the matter, although he was not totally satisfied. But he flattered himself he knew how to be convincing, and he played his trump card.

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

"Should there be any breach of this agreement, the money due to you will not be paid."

He sat back, satisfied. But the woman leant forward towards him, her face a pleasant mask, but a dangerous light burning in her eyes.

"You suggest that I should start to-morrow, Mr. Smith?"

"There is nothing now to keep you. . . ."

"Only one small matter of detail."

He looked up at her, surprised.

"What is that?"

"The payment into my bank of half the agreed sum before I start."

There was a long silence. The man stared at his hostess, an angry flush mounting in his cheeks. She smiled too sweetly.

"You cannot blame me, sir"; she mimicked him. "You are showing a weakness too! Failure to understand the Western mind. You cannot drive us, but you can encourage us. In my case, you can encourage me financially—particularly in the face of threats!"

For a moment she thought that he was going to lose his temper. But the man who called himself Smith controlled himself with a great effort.

"This is a business detail, madame. It should have been brought up when we were discussing terms."

"Quite possibly!"

"I do not feel inclined to alter things now. . . ."

"In that case," she told him quietly, replacing the cigarette in her long holder with another, "I shall not feel inclined to start to-morrow."

As she watched her visitor, the woman realised the nature of the struggle that was going on within him. It was against his policy, his whole training, his very nature, to give in. She very nearly laughed aloud: she had certainly been able to teach him a good lesson.

For she knew the strength of her position : she meant every word that she had said, and the interests represented by this man were too far committed to go back now. . . . Had he not proved himself unpleasant, perhaps she might never have brought up the matter : she knew the money was good. But he had asked for trouble, and she prided herself that if you asked her for trouble, you got it. She smiled to herself as she wondered how he would explain all this to his masters. . . .

"Don't let us quarrel . . ." he started, awkwardly.

"Not at this stage."

"Not at any stage. . . ."

"I ask for nothing better."

"We will pay," he said, with a magnanimous gesture.

"Mr. Smith," she told him quietly, "I trust you implicitly. And I trust my bank manager implicitly. So that when I receive his assurance that the money is in the bank I shall take the next aeroplane for England."

She rose from her chair : it was plainly a gesture of dismissal. The man who answered to the name of Smith rose also, but he felt baffled. The interview had not gone at all according to his plan. He had been warned that this woman was sharp and hard, but not previously had he encountered that side of her character in action. It shocked him, slightly. He had thought he was hard and sharp himself. . . .

"Half the agreed sum will be paid into the bank to-morrow. As soon as the bank opens. . . . I should like you yourself to leave to-morrow . . . there is none too much time if all is to be co-ordinated. . . ."

"I agree."

"You can start to-morrow . . . ?"

She sighed, dramatically. He got the uncomfortable impression that she was bored with him, impatient for him to be off. . . .

"Mr. Smith," she said, and her voice was chilling, "I have already told you that as soon as the money is in the bank, I shall take the next aeroplane for England."

"Of course." He took her hand, bent over it. "And I wish you . . . *bon voyage* . . . and good luck, madame . . . the eyes of the world will look upon the results of your work. . . ."

"They will," she said.

It was not at all the answer which he had expected. He left the room quickly, with the sensation that the interview had got completely out of hand, and with a new feeling of almost alarmed respect for this extraordinary woman.

As the door shut behind him, the graceful figure sat in her chair again, leant her lovely head back on the satin cushions, and half closed her eyes. She made no move as Jenner returned to the room. She acknowledged only with a faint smile his soft words :

"Bravo, madame !"

10: IN WHICH PHYLLIS DRUMMOND EXPERIENCES LUXURY

PHYLLIS DRUMMOND woke up the following morning with none of that fatigue usually attendant on a journey. She rose quickly from her bed and threw back the curtains from the tall french windows leading on to her private balcony. The sun, already gloriously warm, greeted her : and so did the lovely view across Lac Leman towards that oddly shaped mountain well named the Dents du Midi. Phyllis took a deep breath of the stimulating air ; this was luxury indeed after the past few years of drudgery and little beauty. A yacht,

its white sails stretching out for a touch from the very gentle breeze, idled on the lake just opposite her. A gull rose from the water the better to examine its larder, and then plunged after a dainty morsel. A small boat, further out, held two men who were busily spreading their net. The world seemed at peace.

Phyllis glanced towards the next room, and smiled to herself. Then she gave herself up wholly to the unaccustomed caress of the hot sun, and the heavenly placidity of the scene before her. She drank it all in, and then, returning to her room, went to the telephone and ordered her breakfast. That, when it came, was also a revelation . . . a reminder of days nearly forgotten, of a life which had receded in the memory until it had become almost a dream. . . .

With a sigh of sheer contentment, Phyllis started on the dreary business of dressing. But even that was enjoyable in this atmosphere. It was fun to bedeck oneself in clothing usable for not more than a day or two in any one year at home . . . clothing not innocent of a strong hint of moth balls . . . Phyllis laughed dryly as she donned her linen suit. . . .

Satisfied with her appearance, she went to the communicating door to the next room, and listened. But there was no sound from the other side of the wall. She knocked gently, and opened the door an inch or two : still there was no sound. She smiled to herself, but she looked at her watch ; it was now well after nine.

"Good morning," she said, and receiving no reply, she laughed. "Good morning !" she repeated, loudly this time.

"Eh ?" came a voice thick with sleep. "What ?"

"I wished you a good morning."

"I was having it !"

"Hogging it, you mean," Phyllis told him. "Don't forget, you develop a high temperature to-day, so you'd better order a very full breakfast while you can eat it !

I recommend the orange juice, and without question the omelette ! ”

“ You’ve tried it ? ”

“ Yes. With toast, lashings of *butter*, and jam to follow.”

“ You’ll burst,” said the sleepy voice as a statement of fact. There was the sound of a heavy body turning over, and snuggling down again in the bed.

“ Get up ! ” she said severely.

Phyllis closed the door, and turned away with a smile. He would have plenty of time to rest when, as had been arranged, she called for the doctor at midday. What was the name of the fellow who had been briefed ? Ah, yes, here was the name and telephone number written by McIver on a blank card. . . .

The telephone bell summoned her : she took up the instrument.

“ Yes ? . . . I’m afraid the Captain is not awake yet . . . flying always upsets him : you wouldn’t think it, but he’s got rather a weak stomach. . . . ” Phyllis covered the instrument with her hand, and allowed herself the luxury of a quick, gay laugh. Weak tummy, indeed ! “ Yes . . . who . . . a Mrs. Jenner ? . . . oh, well, I don’t want to disturb him . . . I’ll come down.”

She replaced the receiver thoughtfully : they were certainly not letting the grass grow under their feet. She went over to the communicating door, and after knocking opened it again an inch or two.

“ A Mrs. Jenner to see you ! ”

“ Already ? ”

The voice was alert now.

“ Yes, already. I said you were lying in this morning, but that I’d go down. . . . ”

“ Good girl, Phyllis ! And, since they’ve advanced zero hour, we’d better too. On your way down, send for the medico, and make sure the lounge hears you do it ! ”

"You'll miss your breakfast!" she told him, with a mischievous laugh.

"I know, dang it! But we mustn't take any chances."

"All right. . . ."

But as she turned away, he called her.

"Phyllis!"

"Yes?"

"I suppose there's nothing left on your tray?"

"Half a roll."

"I'll have that!"

She laughed. Then she left the room.

They were on the first floor, and Phyllis walked down the flight of stairs to the reception hall. She went straight to the hall porter, who greeted her with a pleasant smile.

"The lady is over there, madame. . . ."

"Yes." Phyllis contrived to look a trifle worried. She spoke very distinctly, a tone or two higher than normally. "But before I go over, could you ring up this number for me?"

"Certainly, madame." The porter looked at the card which she handed to him, and glanced up solicitously. "Nothing wrong, I hope, madame?"

"The Captain is not feeling well," she told him, in the same tone of voice. Phyllis felt slightly awkward talking so unnecessarily loudly, but she had glimpsed that a drab figure sitting on a chair in the direction indicated by the porter, was certainly interested in the conversation. "He looks flushed: he suffers from rather violent attacks of malaria, you know, which last several days, and leave him very weak for days more. It would be a horrible shame if he got an attack just at this moment, so I think it's best to take no chances and get in the doctor."

"Of course, madame. Would you like me to ask him to call?"

"If you please. Where is Mrs. Jenner?"

"That lady in grey, madame. . . ."

"Thank you."

Phyllis walked over to the drab figure, who had visibly relaxed as she turned towards her. As she approached, she saw that the elderly woman was one of those who offered no resistance to advancing years, and made no effort to repair the inevitable damage caused by passing the half-way of the allotted span. Phyllis could not help wondering to herself, not for the first time, at the odd people who managed to marry twice, when others seemingly far more attractive failed to land one husband. . . .

"Mrs. Jenner?"

"Oh!" The figure in grey rose quickly.
"Yes . . .?"

"I'm Mrs. Drummond."

"Oh, I beg your pardon . . . I asked for Captain Drummond . . .?"

"I'm afraid he's not very well. . . ."

"I am so sorry!" Mrs. Jenner seemed a little put out. "Surely it was not for him. . . . I'm sorry, but I overheard . . . that you asked for the doctor?"

Phyllis sat down, and so did Mrs. Jenner.

"Yes, I'm afraid it was."

"Oh, dear!"

"I'm not worried about him!" Phyllis said chattily.
"He gets these attacks, you know. Malaria. Nothing serious, but they're an awful nuisance, because they mean days in bed and then about a week when he's like a chewed string! Did you want to see him on business?"

The other hesitated: just long enough, thought Phyllis. This woman's good, said Phyllis to herself. I must be careful. . . .

"Business? Is he here on business?"

"Have you seen your husband since he's been back

from England, Mrs. Jenner?" counter-attacked Phyllis promptly.

"Of course!"

"Then you should know. . . ."

"I'm sorry. . . ." said Mrs. Jenner without any hesitation, "but you see. . . . I'm upset, Mrs. Drummond. You know what happened. . . .?"

"In England?"

"Yes."

"I have heard that your husband behaved in rather an odd way."

Mrs. Jenner laughed, unexpectedly. It was not a pleasant sound: there was an edge to it.

"He says exactly the same of Captain Drummond."

Phyllis Drummond felt herself bristling: no one could criticise her Hugh in front of her, and get away with it. But she pulled herself together quickly: she had a part to play, and play it she must.

"I have heard that your husband flatly refused to believe the word of mine," she said stiffly.

"I know." Mrs. Jenner was wearing a troubled expression. "But he was right, you know. He brought my son back with him. Poor Henry! He looks so desperately ill now, after this escapade!"

"So you're in it too," said Phyllis to herself: anyway, there was very small doubt that you would be. . . .

"But, Mrs. Drummond, it's not about our husbands' little difference of opinion that I've come. I thought. . . . I thought Captain Drummond might be willing to help me. . . ."

Hullo, what's this?

"Of course, if he's ill, nothing can be done. . . . but I'm afraid. . . ."

"Mrs. Jenner," said Phyllis firmly, "if Captain Drummond has one of his attacks, and I shall know when the doctor arrives—although I'm afraid I've little

doubt—he can do nothing for at least ten days . . . probably more.” She paused, and then suddenly added, deliberately brutally : “ If it is true that Mr. Jenner brought back your son, he has presumably had him shut up again. So what are you afraid of ? ”

“ That he’ll get out again, and go for me ! ” said Mrs. Jenner simply. “ He’s got out of that place once, and he can do it again. His . . . his disease has made him diabolically cunning. And if he does escape, he’ll kill me . . . because he blames me for having been caught again. He told my husband that in the plane when he was being brought home ! ”

Phyllis Drummond made up her mind.

“ Mrs. Jenner,” she said quietly. “ My husband does not believe that your son has come back.”

For a long moment the two women stared at each other. Then Mrs. Jenner, in front of an embarrassed Phyllis, very nearly broke down into tears. But she made a supreme effort, and just managed to control herself.

“ I know,” she said brokenly, “ he thinks that Henry was killed in London. . . . ”

“ Yes,” said Phyllis flatly.

“ What does he think of my husband ? ”

“ He’s not exactly taken with him.”

Mrs. Jenner dabbed the corner of her eyes with her handkerchief.

“ The feeling’s mutual, then. But, Mrs. Drummond, I had to come this morning : I only just heard that he was here, and . . . ”

“ How did you hear ? ” cut in Phyllis.

For answer, Mrs. Jenner handed her the local paper. She pointed out the paragraph : the famous Bulldog Drummond had come out to be with his wife, who was in need, apparently, of the healing air of Switzerland. . . .

“ I came round at once,” continued Mrs. Jenner,

"hoping against hope that he would be able to tell me what to do . . . he is so wise, and . . ."

Phyllis cut in again.

"Your husband does not think so."

"My husband's a fool!" said Mrs. Jenner savagely.

The tone of her voice quite shocked Phyllis Drummond. But she recovered herself quickly, and went on inexorably.

"Yet you say that he was right, and Captain Drummond wrong, over your boy."

"He certainly brought him back," said Mrs. Jenner unhappily. "Of course I was only allowed a glimpse of him from a distance, and how ill he looked!"

"A glimpse? From a distance?"

"Of course." Mrs. Jenner spoke softly. "You see, Mrs. Drummond, the sight of me—his own mother—makes him violent! He would kill me if he could, has sworn to! It is so tragic, for I ask you to believe that he was the sweetest of little boys, as loving a son as a mother could wish for. . . ."

It was just overdone, decided Phyllis. Good acting, yes, but . . . heavy. All the same, taken as a whole, the performance had been most convincing. But it was necessary now that she herself should be convincing, and to do so involved taking a risk which had been foreseen in rehearsal, but which she was nervous to take . . . still, it had to be done. . . .

"I have no children of my own," she told the older woman gently, "but I can understand and sympathise. I'm most terribly sorry . . . perhaps I might persuade my husband to see you for a moment . . . but of course I don't see what he can do. Your husband is scarcely likely to listen to his advice after their recent misunderstanding, is he?"

"He'll find a way!" said Mrs. Jenner eagerly. "He always does, doesn't he?"

"Well, usually. . . ."

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"But I don't want to worry him if he is really ill. . . ."

Phyllis Drummond had a sudden, unpleasant sensation that everything depended on her ability to be convincing in her reply. She was not actually looking at Mrs. Jenner at that moment, but she knew by instinct that she was being watched like a hawk. . . .

She got up from her chair.

"I'll go upstairs and ask him . . ." she said smoothly.

Her visitor also rose.

"Don't trouble," she said quietly. "I must not worry him when he is ill with my little difficulties. . . ."

Phyllis Drummond looked genuinely surprised.

"Little difficulties ! What a way to describe a threat to your life !"

Mrs. Jenner smiled sadly.

"I may be exaggerating. Sometimes my unhappy situation gets on my nerves. . . ."

"Well . . . you will come back in a few days if you want to ? Perhaps this attack of my husband's may not be as bad as usual. . . ."

"That is very kind of you." Mrs. Jenner smiled. "In a few days, then, I will come—even if only to ask how he is getting on. Good-bye, Mrs. Drummond . . . you have been most kind. . . ."

She passed through the glass doors, and down the steps towards the street. Phyllis watched her go ; and then, thoughtfully, mounted the stairs towards her room. . . .

* * * * *

Outside, in the crowded street, a man fell into step with Mrs. Jenner.

"Well ?"

"Yes, he's there all right."

"Did you see him ?"

"No, he's ill."

The man looked at her sharply.

"How are you certain, then? You have not forgotten, I hope, that madame does not pay for mistakes . . . ?"

"There is no mistake. They are, as we knew, in communicating rooms. She has sent for the doctor: she did so before she saw me. And, during our conversation, she offered to let me see him . . . there is no mistake."

"Bluff?"

"Could that dense Englishwoman bluff me? There is no mistake, I tell you."

There was a short pause.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Malaria. He is subject to sharp attacks which keep him in bed for a week, and leave him convalescing for days longer. . . ." She laughed suddenly. "It looks as if we'll be able to take a short holiday. . . ."

"Not on your life!" The man spoke authoritatively. "You will check with the hotel staff, and you will watch that doctor's visits, every day!"

"But of course!" she laughed. "And that will still leave time for an *aperitif*!"

He swung away from her, and went to a telephone. He put through a call to Geneva.

* * * * *

Phyllis Drummond knocked, and then opened the communicating door a few inches.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Determined to make up for this lost breakfast! I say, Phyllis, you won't forget to smuggle in the grub, will you?"

She laughed gaily.

"No."

"Good. You couldn't start now, I suppose?"

She entered the room, and stared at the remarkably healthy-looking and massive individual in the bed.

"My dear, you don't look nearly flushed enough ! I'll have to get going with my rouge, for the benefit of the hotel staff."

"Don't you dare ! I'll wriggle under the sheets."

"You'd better !" She paused, and smiled to him.

"Aren't you going to ask me how it went ?"

"How did it go ?"

"Well. Just a reconnaissance, of course. To make certain that the great Hugh Drummond was really here. But I bluffed her. . . ."

"Sure ?"

"My dear man, wasn't I brought up on poker ?"

"Of course, I'd forgotten."

"You mustn't forget things about me !" she told him severely. "That's very rude in a husband."

"I'll remember in future."

But she didn't answer him : there was a soft light in her eyes.

"Hugh will be mighty pleased about this," she said.

11 : IN WHICH THE PROFESSIONALS ARE SCANDALISED

"WELL, I dunno . . ." said Mister Wilson.

"And I dunno neither," agreed Mister Kemp.

They spoke more in sorrow than in anger. Both very worthy servants of His Majesty, it hurt them to see such goings on. It was all against their formed instincts, their training, and their pride in the integrity of their profession. It was more than that : it was bringing personalities into the very spirit of Customs and Excise, the one thing that you must not do. A little leniency here and there, yes. But no toleration of any serious attempt at evasion, and a really heavy

hand on any deliberate plan to smuggle. No overlooking an obvious case because of the female form or pleasing features of the culprit, for instance . . . yet all this was what was going on flagrantly before their scandalised eyes.

And it was no good complaining: the Chief Inspector, although even he flinched most of the time, was evidently on the side of the new employee, although he could scarcely bring his horrified self to talk to him . . . all very mysterious.

Very mysterious indeed. This fellow, who had only joined the evening before, did such odd things without a disapproving word from those in authority. In the first place, he stood at the exit door of all planes incoming from Switzerland, and always just at the bottom of the movable stairway used by the passengers. He seemed to judge each passenger as she descended: it was the interested Mister Kemp who had first noticed that he only watched for women. Of any age, it must be said: attraction was not his criterion. The fascinated Mister Wilson had a theory that selection was only by height, for selection was definitely going on. The newcomer, when all the passengers were off-loaded, returned to the place of duty, and saw to it in no uncertain manner that he alone examined his selected.

About five-foot nine seemed to be the dangerous height . . . dangerous, that is, for the female passenger. For any of approximately that height were put through it in almost a sadistic manner. Everything was turned out of all their baggage, and none too tidily or gently. Complaints were rife; passengers infuriated. None, however, got any satisfaction. The examination continued brutal and uncouth, so much so that it really looked as if it was done on a deliberate plan.

But it was noticeable that if there were no female passengers of approximately five foot nine, then this astonishing newcomer deliberately picked the best

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looking of the women, and let her get away with murder. . . .

He was so odd to look at, too. He had white hair, a bushy white moustache, and his face was drawn and lined : he was far too fat, even for his height. Mister Kemp told Mister Wilson that he simply could not be as old as he looked, or he would have been retired years ago : Mister Wilson told Mister Kemp that it was a pity he had not been . . . even with the admitted shortage of staff, this sort of thing let the whole show down. Mister Kemp agreed.

But the Chief Inspector, unusually pale, said and did nothing, except to avert his eyes whenever possible, and once to hint that it was his fervent hope that he would not have to keep the newcomer for long. . . .

* * * * *

The machine circled Northolt gracefully on that Tuesday afternoon. It was signalled in, and straightened out to land. Madame, looking out of the windows, thought that the lovely day was surely a good omen. . . .

Madame was in an unusually contented frame of mind. Everything had gone well, very well indeed. It was really rather providential that Drummond had been laid low on arrival at Vevey : the difficulty of keeping him interested enough to remain abroad for sufficient time had worried her slightly. Not that she had not faith in the ingenuity of Jenner. Particularly now that he had carried out his baiting mission to London with such brilliant success. But still, it made things very much more easy. It gave her at the worst a week to work undisturbed, and at best perhaps another week or more. She would need that time : madame did not disguise from herself that her task would be difficult, much more difficult than her employers imagined. What confident fools they were ! Not that she would

fail, that was out of the question, with the final payment only on results, and the sum involved one so large that it appealed even to her. But . . . it would not be easy going, and she was bound to confess that Drummond—with his astonishing capacity to poke an inconvenient nose into her affairs—was much better out of the country and miles away.

As the plane swooped down and straightened out, madame drew her glass from her handbag and took a final glance at her face. She smiled to herself with satisfaction : there was no doubt that she had lost none of the Thespian art of making herself unrecognisable. Not that she feared recognition : with Drummond out of the country, and his foolish drones probably drinking themselves silly in some fashionable club, there was no one to achieve a fluke and become suspicious of the elderly lady returning home after years in exile, an exile forced by the war. Not, she flattered herself as she looked in the mirror, that even Drummond himself, meeting her face to face at that moment, would recognise in the features she beheld in her glass any sort of resemblance to those no doubt indelibly planted on his mind. The loveliness and glamour of Irma Peterson, by a dexterous use of the tricks of the trade, was totally gone. Her real age was obliterated. She was now just a dull, plain Englishwoman of more than middle age, the graceful form of her figure had been coarsened, her clothing was desperately pre-war British, even her ankles—in darned woollen stockings—were thick. Madame laughed gaily to herself.

She replaced the mirror as the wheels of the machine touched down. She gathered together her small belongings, and looked around at the other passengers, similarly occupied as the pilot taxied towards the point of disembarkation. When they stopped, and the roar of the engines ceased, she rose and took her place among the other passengers as they started to leave the

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aeroplane. She smiled sweetly at the stewardess as she pressed a small tip into her hand. A characteristically small tip : elderly ladies travelling alone were seldom generous. She negotiated the steps from the plane to the ground with just the right amount of caution : people of her age were not as agile as they used to be. . . .

She had to wait a few moments for her luggage to be produced from the plane. But when it was collected, she was pleased to note that there would be no further delay, as a fat, white-haired inspector seemed to have taken possession of it.

"Kindly look at this list, madam . . ." he said in a gruff voice, handing her a large card.

She smiled to him sweetly, and as she spoke she noticed his age : England must be in a bad way still to employ such elderly men. . . .

"I've got nothing to declare. All my belongings . . ."

But the old fellow interrupted her rudely.

"Read that list, madam. When you've read it, I'll deal with your baggage."

She looked at him haughtily : the man might have to receive a lesson in manners. Bureaucracy run wild, it looked like : what a state the country seemed to be in, with the little official puffed out with a totally false appreciation of his own importance ! Still, she would humour him just so far and no farther. But, as she looked down the imposing list of articles, which seemed to cover everything that everybody would certainly have, and a lot more besides, she caught herself wondering if this old boor would treat her in quite the same manner were she dressed and looking as she normally faced the world. . . .

"Well ?"

The tone was curt : she looked up in genuine surprise.

"Can't wait about all day, you know. There are others besides you. . . ."

Mister Wilson, just beside them, cast an agonised glance in the direction of his colleague. Really, for the good name of the profession, this simply could not be allowed to go on. . . .

She handed back the card.

"I have read it," she said coldly.

"What have you to declare?"

"Nothing. As I was about to tell you some time ago, all my belongings are either articles for personal use, or old things I originally bought in this country."

"We'll soon see," said the old tyrant rudely. "Open the lot."

Really, this was insupportable: she flushed with a swiftly rising anger. What a change from the last time she had visited the country! The officials then had been meticulous in their work, but they had been cheerfully courteous. Perhaps she was just unlucky to find herself in the hands of this domineering old fool: if he asked for it much more, she'd let him have the rough edge of her tongue. . . . oh, no, of course she couldn't do that, not dressed as she was. It would be out of character. But she would let him see her disapproval in a cold, Kensington manner. . . .

She opened her two suit-cases, and also her small dressing-case.

Horried, she watched the old fellow get to work. Not that she was afraid of what he might find, for she had spoken practically the truth: what harm was there in a middle-aged lady being extra cautious about colds in the head, and having a few small presents for friends? All was in keeping with the character she was playing; she was far too great an artist to have overlooked that. But this awful fellow seemed to be taking a malignant pleasure in scattering her tidily folded clothing, and her goods and chattels, in all directions, with absolutely no concern for their welfare. And

having roughly pushed the contents of one case back, he was now deliberately starting on the other. . . .

Even with that provocation, she remained—although not without an effort—in character. Placing both her hands on the counter which separated them, she addressed her tormentor firmly, but without heat.

“Will you please be a little more careful of my things,” she demanded. “There is no need to disarrange anything. . . .”

“How do you know?” The horrible old man leant towards her. “Who’s examining these things, you or me? How do I know that you aren’t smuggling great flagons of scent in these underclothes? I’ve seen your quiet, respectable type before, ho, yes! They’re often the worst! You might have all sorts of jewels hidden away in . . . this!”

Mister Wilson felt very faint indeed: this was the worst ever! For his aged colleague was now holding up, in full view of all and sundry, a most intimate piece of feminine attire. . . .

Just for a few seconds, the middle-aged, grey-haired woman hesitated. She was evidently undergoing a dreadful strain, and it was touch and go whether or not she lost her temper. The middle finger of her right hand drummed a quick tattoo on the wooden counter, and then she exploded: not, in the opinion of Mister Wilson, without every reason. As for Mister Kemp, on the other side, he very nearly cheered.

The outraged passenger used one or two surprising words: she used a great many different words. For a lady of her staid appearance, she certainly handled the situation extremely forcefully. But all the time, Irma Peterson just managed to remember the part she was playing, and in a curious way the restraint imposed added to the effect of the vigorous verbal tirade. She stopped only for lack of breath. . . .

And then, under the amazed eyes of Mister Wilson

and Mister Kemp, a strange thing happened: their dreadful colleague apologised. It had taken this spirited elderly dame to subdue the old man: the tyrant was cowed. He did not apologise gracefully, of course: he just mumbled something into his moustache, and proceeded to look at the contents of the second case in rather a cursory manner. The dressing-case he completely ignored.

Without a word, he chalked up the baggage. Then he turned away from the counter, as a porter gathered up the things, and walked over towards the inner office. . . .

And a jolly good thing too, murmured Mister Wilson to Mister Kemp. Mister Kemp, in an undertone, agreed. Lost his nerve, probably, thought Mister Wilson. Mister Kemp, absorbed in much the same speculation, completely omitted to notice an undeclared box of cigars.

But, although the old man had shuffled from the scene in a leisurely manner, there had been nothing leisurely about his movements once he was out of sight. With a sprightliness which would have staggered his erstwhile colleagues, he had made a dash for a shining Rolls-Bentley waiting by the airport offices, divesting himself of his jacket as he ran. He pulled a gay tweed cap over his eyes, and donned a brown overcoat—both of which he found ready in the car—almost in one movement. Then, a cheerful grin of triumph on his face, he drove off at speed . . . showing a remarkable mastery of the powerful machine. . . .

As he flashed by the Swiss-Air bus, the grey-haired lady, more composed now, was just entering it. Her late tormentor just managed to resist doffing his cap.

12: IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND
EXPOUNDS A THEORY

THE show had been excellent, and the dinner which followed it not at all bad, although full of shortages. However, Algy Longworth had gone a bust and ordered champagne, and this certainly helped to liven up the proceedings. Not that Longworth required much artificial livening up : Cynthia was the sort of blonde who went straight to his susceptible heart, in that her colouring was by no means the end to her attraction, although it might be the beginning. And she was holding her own in his special brand of light-hearted banter, which Longworth found as stimulating as the bubbles in his glass.

What was more, she trod a pretty delicate measure on the ballroom floor. He had tested that between the soup and the main dish. She moved niftily, he was bound to admit : a highly gratifying blending of individual grace and a soft yielding to the master at the helm. You could do your special bits without any fear of taking a purler into the band. Most unusual, with the modern independent girl. Altogether, a thoroughly decorative and satisfactory filly to have about the place, for the sort of evening of innocent this and that in which Algy Longworth specialised.

It was, therefore, with something of a shock that he distinctly heard the soft hoot of an owl. He glanced quickly at the bottle : no, it was still half full. His capacity, Algy Longworth told himself, could not have deteriorated quite to that extent, even without practice. Yet it was odd : he was almost certain somebody—some big game-hunter, probably—had told him once that you did not get owls in ballrooms of hotels. . . .

A waiter passed close to their table, and once again Longworth heard the soft hoot of an owl. It sounded rather urgent and a bit mechanised, but there could be no mistaking it. If it wasn't the hoot of an owl, it was a noise very like the hoot of an owl . . . and as he came to this startling conclusion, Algy Longworth broke the record for the sitting high jump by several inches. Of course, Hugh's signal!

"What's the matter?" asked Cynthia sympathetically. "Got the fidgets?"

But Hugh was in Switzerland, probably swigging far better and far cheaper champagne, at that very moment. It couldn't be Hugh's rallying call! What on earth was this waiter strolling about between the tables for, emitting this plaintive sound which—dash it!—was actually plagiarising old Hugh's patent?

Should he speak to him about it? Fellows shouldn't be allowed to stroll about making nasal noises which sounded deliberately like another fellow's special signal. Most improper, not to say upsetting . . . ah, the dreadful fellow was turning now. . . .

"How about working off those fidgets on a dance?"

Cynthia half rose, but sat down again quickly. She stared at her companion in surprise. For some extraordinary reason she seemed abruptly to have lost all interest for him . . . he did not even seem to hear what she was saying . . . ?

He's winking. Algy Longworth shook himself. It simply couldn't be true. You don't get winked at by waiters, not where he was accustomed to go. This required looking into: if he didn't put a stop to it at once there might be no limits to the familiarity of that waiting johnny. And while he was about it, he'd tell him not to hoot like an owl as well. Most extraordinary behaviour!

Longworth rose, and as he did so he saw the questioning expression on the face of the girl he was entertaining.

"Oh, ah . . ." he said.

"Is anything the matter?"

"I think a waiter's balmy."

"What!"

"Well, I'm just going to see. Shan't be long : stoke up for a foxtrot when I return."

He was off before she was able to say another word. Cynthia stared after him, and then shrugged her shoulders, and picked up her glass. It was quite obvious that, whatever the waiter might be, Algy Longworth was himself a very queer customer indeed. . . .

To his astonishment, Longworth did not get in the first word.

"Gentleman waiting for you outside, sir. Name of Darrell."

"Oh, ah," said Longworth. "Did he tell you to hoot?"

"Like an owl? Yes, sir."

"Next time, then, don't do it like a stuffed one."

Feeling that he had extricated himself from an awkward encounter with a good deal of saved face, Longworth transferred a half-crown from his pocket to the upturned palm with supreme dexterity, and walked straight on out of the ballroom into the lounge. Peter Darrell came forward to meet him.

"You've been the hell of a time!" he complained.

"Sorry!" said Longworth. "I couldn't believe it at first. Why didn't you send me a note?"

"She might have read it."

"Oh."

"Come on."

"Eh?"

"Come on: I've got a taxi waiting, and we must hurry."

"But, here, I say!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Cynthia."

"Didn't you say good night?"

"Of course not."

Peter Darrell looked at him impatiently.

"Algy, you're slipping! That call means all hands on deck, and scamper to it. And it's always meant that, as you well know."

Algy Longworth did not resent Darrell's tone: he knew that he deserved the censure, although it had been almost impossible to believe his ears in the circumstances in which he had heard that first hoot. However, things had to be put right, and quickly: there could be no mistaking the urgency of Darrell's impatience.

Longworth darted to the entrance to the ballroom.

The *maître d'hôtel*, an old friend, smiled to him. But Longworth spoke quickly.

"Louis, send my bill to the flat."

"But of course, Mister Longworth. . . ."

"And go and tell the girl at my table that I've been called away on business. She'll probably bite you, but I can't help that."

Nothing surprises a good *maître d'hôtel*.

"Certainly, Mr. Longworth."

"If you can't get a taxi, hire a car and send her home."

"Yes, sir."

"Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Longworth."

Without so much as a faintly raised eyebrow, Louis turned tactfully to perform his errand. . . .

Algy Longworth brought back his hat and coat, and almost ran through the lounge in the wake of the quickly moving figure of Peter Darrell. They climbed into the taxi, and drove off at once: evidently Darrell had briefed the driver beforehand.

"Where are we going?" asked Longworth.

"To meet Hugh."

"What !"

Peter Darrell laughed.

"It surprised me too, Algy. I was having a final pint at the club when he rang up. And from the sound of his voice, something's up."

"Yoicks !" commented Longworth : he looked at his friend and smiled. "We aren't driving to Switzerland, presumably ?"

"Some small hotel out Olympia way."

"Well, I'll be jiggered !" grinned Longworth contentedly. "Things certainly move."

That taxi did. The incentive of double fare, promised the driver by Darrell if nothing passed him on the way, worked wonders even if it did tend to age his passengers.

They drew up in an ill-lighted side-street. As Darrell paid off the delighted cabby, Longworth took a quick look round. The whole street seemed to be composed of small residential hotels, from what could be seen. Highly respectable places, or so Longworth told himself, where the greatest sensation would be lemon sole instead of plaice for supper. . . .

Hugh Drummond, grinning broadly, met them at the door. But beyond a word of greeting, he said nothing until he had shepherded them to a room on the first floor, which faced out to the front.

"Sit down," he said quietly. "Sorry there's no beer. . . ."

They obeyed him at once. Hugh Drummond, who had remained by the door, switched off the light. Then he moved across the room and sat beside the window, drawing back the curtain as he did so.

"You've been the heck of a time !" he said suddenly.

"My fault !" promptly admitted Longworth.

"He was more blonde-struck than I thought !" explained Darrell.

They heard Hugh Drummond laugh.

"Chaps, Irma's in there. . . ."

"Where . . . ?"

They spoke simultaneously, and in a whisper. Perhaps both of them, when thoughts of death had not been paramount during that nightmare drive, had hoped to hear those very words : but when they came, they were received with a sense of awe. Neither Darrell nor Longworth knew that they had lowered their voices. . . .

"Hotel opposite. It was a risk to bring you here, but it had to be done. I've got to put you in the picture, and I daren't leave myself. But just in case we're interrupted, she's an elderly lady with grey hair, the sort of typical just over middle-age Englishwoman you see on the Continent, perhaps a trifle more dried up than to pattern."

He paused. Then he continued evenly, but speaking more quickly than usual.

"On Saturday I had a long think. Don't say it, Algy : yes, it hurt. But the rusty machinery, from being a bit seized up at first, started to work all right. Unusually well, as it's turned out !" He laughed : it was obvious that he was in high spirits. "That think brought out one thing very strongly : either Henry Mason had been planted on us, or he had planted himself. You see, it was his own suggestion that we should take him to the flat. I might have done so anyway, but he was taking no chances . . . and he was giving me a specimen of his handwriting as well. Remember ? He was frightened, or he was pretending to be frightened, of being overheard, so he wrote the suggestion. I didn't think it was far-fetched at the time, not until much later . . . not until I began to look at the whole thing from an entirely different point of view. . . ."

"In your arm-chair ?" ventured Darrell.

"Correct. You see, the police aren't fools. In a private conversation with McIver, when I got him out

of his office, he told me so, and he should know. And if one admitted that hypothesis and combined it with the arrogant confidence of the man Jenner, it was reasonable to conclude—I hate saying it, chaps!—that no murder had been committed. I shied at that humiliating thought at first, but everything fitted . . . if you were prepared to accept another hypothesis which I'll tell you about in a minute. True, I hadn't examined the . . . er . . . body: why should I? A man doesn't live with a knife in his throat. But almost any illusion, seen at a distance, can be managed by a well-prepared person, and the rug by the window in my room—almost identical to my own, was not my own. I had established that very easily: I had picked that rug up at a local sale, and the sale number of the original was marked in indelible pencil on one corner of the lining. There was no such mark on the rug left in my room. . . .

“That only proved one thing, that the murder, or quote murder unquote, had been very carefully planned, and planned to take place in my bedroom. . . .

“Why? Well, boys, as you know, Irma is never very far from my thoughts. And she never does anything without a reason. And . . . since I don't flatter myself that any ordinary murderer would go so much out of his way just to commit his crime on premises owned by me, Irma seemed somehow to be indicated . . . but how? No, Algy!”

Longworth promptly put back his cigarette case into his pocket.

“We can't take any sort of chance!” Drummond said gently. “I daren't risk losing her, and although she's probably tucked up and snoring by now, a red glow from a lighted cigarette in a dark room does rather advertise that someone might be using that darkness.”

“Sorry, Hugh!”

Drummond grinned sympathetically in the darkness.

"I wish it were otherwise!" He paused for a moment, and then went on quietly. "If Irma was at the back of it, the whole thing was something staged to interest . . . and, incidentally, mortify . . . me. Typical of the charming lady! But I hated to acknowledge that the self-satisfied Inspector who visited us had been right, so I thought a bit more. We would have had to take the blonde's word as to the handwriting of his letter to her, if Mason hadn't *conveniently* provided us with the necessary specimen. We might still be talking to Mason if Jenner hadn't *conveniently* turned up to frighten him into the only other room, my bedroom with the rug. Jenner was, for us, most *conveniently* mild in going away to let us think over the position, after he had made time for his accomplice to stage the horrific scene. But he *conveniently* arranged to come back after our discovery, in order to gloat.

"Peter, Algy, he did gloat: he just couldn't help it! And it was at that stage in my thoughts that I think I really decided that I had been taken for a ride. But if I had, it could only be at Irma's instigation. And if that were so there must be a purpose, and what did she want me to do? Because I was darned certain I would do the opposite!"

Hugh Drummond laughed abruptly.

"Lord, talking makes you thirsty, doesn't it? I must get this over quick . . . but you chaps have got to be in the picture, because now she's over here, anything may happen at any time. All the stress was on Switzerland: Jenner taking Mason or . . . 'Mason,' back there: and the letter asking me to go at once and get revenge. It was well done: if I had still thought that Mason had been murdered, I'd have gone like the wind. Now, did Irma want me in Switzerland, or did she merely want me out of the way?"

"I took a chance, boys. Irma hasn't exactly been lucky with me around, and so I argued that where I

was, she wouldn't be working. So that if she wanted me out of England, it was England where she wanted to work. So that meant I stayed. But I had to give the impression of going, and then I decided to take the greatest risk of all.

"I told Phyllis the whole story. She might have put her foot down, of course, and I thought she was going to, until I asked for her help. Wonderful, what a difference it makes with women, if you include them in. She took her orders like a lamb from that moment onwards, only don't ever dare, either of you, even to suggest to her that they were orders. You see, I let her have my way. . . .

"I couldn't let either of you know what I was really up to. I was sorry about that, but it couldn't be helped. You two had to carry on quite normally, and the easiest way to make you was to make you have to. I booked separate rooms. One was for Ted Jerningham. . . ."

"Old Ted!" gasped Darrell.

"Yes. Phyllis is very fond of him, but still . . . Ted is about my size, and he had to play the part of Captain Drummond. We chartered a private plane . . . so that we could land at Ted's place on the way, and Ted and I change places. He's got to get ill as soon as he gets there . . . malaria, poor chap. That'll keep 'em all quiet that end . . . I wonder how he's feeling now!"

Hugh Drummond laughed again.

"I doubled back to London. The way I was looking at it, I knew I was up against the hardest part from then on. I had to meet Irma, and I had to recognise her. And I didn't even know where she was coming from. I thought it out this way: if she wanted me out of the way—and everything depended on that assumption—she'd make darned certain I really fell for the bait. Personally, probably. So she'd be waiting in Switzerland somewhere, and the odds were that she'd

come from there. And quickly too, in case I got tired of the Mason business. Obviously, by air. . . .

"McIver came in useful again then : he's been a gallant brick, because he's scared stiff of his Commissioner, but he's given a lot of under-cover help. He got me into the Customs staff at Northolt, where the Swiss planes land, swearing the boss to secrecy, and making out I was one of his own men. So far so good. But Irma wouldn't land as her glorious self, that was painfully obvious. So how on earth to recognise such a mistress of the art of making-up ?

"Then I remembered. I remembered old Carl's weakness, which he had passed on to his daughter, mistress, wife . . . whatever Irma was to Carl Peterson. That little tattoo in moments of great stress, beaten by a finger of the right hand. If only I could make her give herself away by that !

"It was just possible. If I made certain that any female of her height—height is the only thing you can't fool around with, not even such an artist as Irma—was examined by me, and if I was sufficiently intolerable, there was just a chance I would make her give herself away. Naturally, I myself did not look precisely as I do just now !

"Chaps, you'd have died ! I made scene after scene. I scandalised my colleagues, and terrified my clients. I was appalling . . . but, when I last expected it, the long shot came home. . . .

"I got to the bus terminus sufficiently in front of her to alter my appearance again. Then I followed her to that hotel. Luckily there was a vacant room in this one opposite. And here we are !"

"I'd like to cheer !" said Longworth.

"Thrice," said Darrell.

"You can sit up instead," said Drummond wearily. "I'm done. Peter first till four : then wake up Algy, who relieves you. If anyone leaves that pub opposite,

wake me up at once for an inspection : any description I could give of her would be too vague. Good-night, boys . . . I say, isn't it a lark ! I wonder what she's up to . . . ? ”

The door opened. As cool as a cucumber, Cynthia Evershed walked in.

13: IN WHICH A SENTRY IS ON THE MAT

ALL three men stared at her, bereft of speech. The girl, conscious of and rather pleased with her dramatic entrance, shut the door behind her and with it shut out the light.

“ Well, my curiosity is satisfied,” her voice, low and musical, came to them in the dark, “ and at least, no one else was eavesdropping.”

Hugh Drummond was the first to recover.

“ How did you get in ? ”

“ Walked in, of course. You left the door unlocked. And not so loud : you have no idea how thin these walls are ! ”

“ Obviously not,” commented Darrell.

“ Did anyone see you coming up here ? ” asked Drummond.

“ No,” they heard her laugh gently, “ and don't let that worry you, Captain Drummond. Your Phyllis can't complain after this affair with one Ted Jerningham.”

“ Goodness, gracious me ! ” said Longworth. “ But, I say. . . . ”

“ Say it softly, then.”

“ Oh, ah, I see what you mean.”

"That's terrific."

"How did you find us here?"

She laughed, a rippling sound.

"D'you think I'm the sort of girl who can be just walked out on?"

"No," said Longworth hastily.

"Well, you seemed to. I hopped out after you, saw you disappearing into a taxi, took the next one by bribing him to leave his fare stranded inside the place, bribed him more to follow yours, and we just made it. It was as simple as that."

"A jolly good night for cabbies," said Darrell dryly.

"So you bribed yours too? I thought you must have injected him with some sort of atom bug."

"And when you arrived here?" said Hugh Drummond seriously.

"I've told you. I followed them in."

"Up the stairs?"

"Up the stairs."

"And you've been kneeling at the keyhole ever since?" His tone was severe.

"No." For the first time, her voice seemed to lose a little of its confidence. "As a matter of fact, I haven't. I've been standing outside the door, and I haven't had to strain either ear to get nearly everything you said. I'm not sorry, Captain Drummond. That streak of impertinence—your description, but now it's mine too—had no right to desert me. Any girl of spirit would have resented it. I started to listen, really, as a sort of prank: to get even. Then I realised the importance of it all: not fully, of course, because I don't know who your precious Irma is. I could have come in then, and perhaps I should have, to warn you how easy it was to overhear. But I got sort of fascinated. And I fooled my conscience by telling it that I was a type of sentry, making sure that no one unfriendly listened instead of me. Weak, isn't it?"

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"Very."

"All the same, Captain Drummond, I needn't have come in now and told you anything about it. I could have just skulked home, hugging my guilty secret. It would have been much easier."

The truth of her statement was impressive.

"Oh, ah," said Longworth.

"For goodness' sake, keep it down !"

"Yes, of course." Longworth lowered his voice.

"But that's very true, Hugh."

Hugh Drummond made no reply.

"Stick it, Algy."

"Yes, rather."

"Well, go on, then . . . or I'll call you a streak of something else."

"Miss Evershed."

"Yes, Captain Drummond ?"

They all waited tensely : they knew that he had made up his mind.

"What do you propose to do now ?"

She answered without any hesitation.

"Well, I hope to get some sleep sometime. But, of course, I want to sign on first."

"Sign on ?"

"Join up. Volunteer. You know . . . help."

"That's very kind of you." There was a hint of laughter in his voice. "But I don't think this is quite the sort of thing. . . ."

His voice died away.

"Go on," she told him curtly. "Say it ! Men only. That's nonsense, Captain Drummond. Women are the biggest and often the most successful law-breakers . . . and I rather gathered this little affair is scarcely within the law ?"

"It's on the side of law and order."

"Don't quibble."

"I won't in the morning." Hugh Drummond laughed

IN WHICH A GIRL PROVES HER VALUE

softly. "And I'm not saying you mightn't be useful. You've been most refreshing, anyway."

"How like a man!" Her voice was petulant. "Gets a girl all worked up in the evening, and then puts it all off till the morning!"

"Who'll you have to see you home?"

"Oh, the beast I know, I suppose!"

"That's you, Algy."

"I was afraid so, Hugh. I say, I'm rather frightened of her."

"I'm not dangerous . . . yet," said the girl.

She gave a little gasp as the door opened behind her. But neither to Darrell nor Longworth was Hugh Drummond's silent movement across the room anything new. His amazing ability to see and move soundlessly in pitch darkness was a gift that had more than once been most useful. . . .

"Good night," he said softly, and there was a pleasant grin on his face. "And thanks, sentry . . ."

He gave her a little push, and she went quickly. Algy Longworth slipped out after her. Drummond gently closed the door.

"What does all that mean?" asked Peter Darrell.

A soft laugh came from the darkness where Drummond was standing.

"Only the Lord knows," he said quietly. "And I don't think He's telling just now. . . ."

14: IN WHICH A GIRL PROVES HER VALUE

THERE was rather a painful scene in the morning. Apparently there had been complaints: the normal hour for retiring was early in that locality, and any

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conversation after ten o'clock was highly unpopular with the regular inmates. The management—a formidable woman of wintry aspect—also took a poor view of a client who took a single room and then filled it with guests, and the comment was acid. During Hugh Drummond's brave attempts to get a word in somehow, Peter Darrell disappeared, but came back in a few minutes—long before the management had repeated herself—and conveyed to his leader the welcome news that alternative accommodation had been secured two doors up the street : still quite near enough to observe the small hotel opposite from the windows. The necessity for tactful placation having been removed, Drummond paid the bill, and the three swept out . . . very rapidly, with their hats pulled over their eyes and their coat-collars turned up.

As soon as they were installed, Hugh Drummond got down to the business in hand.

"Conference, chaps !" They gathered round him, as he sat a little back from one corner of the window, whence he could watch the comings and goings through that important front door just down the opposite side of the street. "Somebody once said attack is the best form of defence, and apart from the obvious over-simplification, he wasn't far wrong. Anyway, we can't just sit here and wear our eyes out waiting. . . ."

"She may come out as someone else . . . ?" suggested Darrell.

"No, Peter." Drummond was firm on the point. "She can't . . . not having gone in there and registered in her present character. Why should she want to, anyway ? She's no reason to suppose that character is suspect. But what may happen is that she won't poke her nose out of doors for days : people may visit her instead. And as at present situated, we've no possible means of finding out if this is going on."

"Unless one of us goes to stay there too?" suggested Longworth hopefully.

"Too risky, Algy. Who knows? One or all of us may have a life-long habit, which we know nothing about, which gives us away to her just as that tapping finger has been so useful to us. Short periods, yes: that's a legitimate risk. But not actually to stay there. . . ."

He paused, and then laughed suddenly.

"Orders, boys! Algy, hop to the flat, and get an old, shiny blue suit you'll find in the wardrobe. And a pretty decrepit bowler. Thank the lord—once only!—for the prevalent hoard of Government little wigs! I'm going to inspect every gas fire in that hotel."

"Are there gas fires in that hotel?" asked Darrell.

"It's odds on," Drummond told him. "There've been one in every room of the two houses we know in this street." He nodded towards the fireplace. "If not, I'll have to think of something else. Bring the stuff back here, Algy, and also my little case—you know, the make-up one. Then I'll want you to go and interview Cynthia."

Longworth started.

"It's a funny thing," he said, "but I believe I'm off blondes. . . ."

"But she's lovely!"

"Yes," admitted Longworth moodily, "but she bites. With words, I mean. Icy words straight from the North Pole. You should have heard her last night, on the subject of me."

"She had provocation."

"Girls should listen, not speak," said Longworth sagely. "If they say anything, they should just say 'yes'."

"You're still going to see her, as I can't spare the time. And you're going to judge her—using that vast

experience of yours in regard to young ladies. I want to know if she's genuine, or not."

"You aren't seriously thinking of using her, Hugh?"

Peter Darrell seemed perturbed.

"Not without the highest references, Peter!" Hugh Drummond was grinning: Darrell's caution, although frequently a most useful influence, never failed to amuse him. "That's your job. Go along to McIver, and make him dig up her whole background."

"Do I say anything about . . . Irma?"

Hugh Drummond was serious at once.

"Not a word! Although McIver personally deserves it, the police as a whole do not! When we're ready to make them believe us—and incidentally when we know ourselves what she's up to—then we'll make the whole thing into a McIver benefit, and we'll take pride and pleasure in thumbing our noses at the Commissioner."

"I hoped you'd say that!" beamed Longworth.

"So did I," said Darrell, "but won't he want to know why you threw up your Northolt job?"

"Bull's-eye, Peter." Drummond thought for a moment. "Tell him I got fed up waiting for so doubtful a long shot."

"Right."

"Off you go, then—both of you. And be careful in the street: don't give Irma a chance of recognising your handsome features."

"Not on your life!"

"So long, chaps."

Left to himself, Hugh Drummond lost himself in thought. He would have given a great deal to know just where the attractive Cynthia stood. . . .

* * * * *

The large, blue-suited inspector from the gas company made an immediate appeal to the thin but imposing

manageress of the hotel. She approved of his old-fashioned manners : he was quite a conservative, as she afterwards confided to one of her regulars : such a nice change from the conceited know-alls who seemed to pester them nowadays. And he had been very helpful about all the replacements she had demanded. Really, things might be looking up instead of looking down, the way he had even volunteered to have some of the quite minor defective parts put right. And he had been so considerate to the guests. . . .

But, although he was earning such a golden opinion, Hugh Drummond was not getting anywhere in particular. The manageress would not let him out of her sight : she was seizing an opportunity which had evidently long been denied her of airing her grievances. His head reeled with technical terms which struck Drummond as meaningless and unspellable, as they made the grand tour. And so far there was nothing in any room to identify its occupier.

He had set out on this reconnaissance with two aims : the first, to discover the name Irma was using, and the second to find out how she was utilising her time in that most unlikely atmosphere. He had been given no opportunity to have a glance at the reception book, but that would have told him nothing, unless she were the only arrival of the previous day . . . a most unlikely happening. He had gambled on being able to recognise, in one of the bedrooms, one of her suitcases . . . and perhaps turning this gaunt woman's immense conversational powers on to the subject of her new guest. But as they went drearily on from one room to the next, and he listened to vivid criticism of the apparatus installed, he began to get anxious. There couldn't be very many more.

So far he had managed to hold his own, by the simple process of agreeing with everything the manageress said, and promising to see personally that it would be put

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right . . . he smiled to himself as he thought of the uproar there would indisputably be in the local office, when, in a week or so, this talkative woman went to find out why nothing had yet been done. But the smile was very fleeting, because they must be very nearly at the end of the bedrooms, and he could scarcely ask for a repeat. . . .

She threw open a door, and then apologised volubly to someone inside. She used three times as many words as were necessary to state that she had thought the occupier to be downstairs in the lounge. . . .

Hugh Drummond looked over her shoulder, and for a second his normally imperturbable composure nearly left him. But his reaction was immediate : he walked past the manageress into the room.

"Sorry, miss," he said in the deprecating tone of voice he had adopted for the shiny blue suit, with just a trace of Cockney which went with the decrepit bowler in his greasy hand. "Just come to see your gas fire's all ready for when the nights turn chilly."

"Oh, I see !" said Cynthia Evershed. "Please carry on."

"Thank you, miss. . . ."

"I really am sorry, Miss Baxter," said the manageress, as Drummond knelt by the fire. "I had no idea at all you were still up here. Of course if I'd known I should most certainly have knocked, of course I should. I thought you'd gone out or were in the lounge. Have you seen our lounge yet? No? Oh, you must ; we serve delicious morning coffee from eleven-fifteen to eleven-forty-five sharp, but only to residents and their guests, of course. Disgraceful, isn't it?"

Cynthia Evershed looked at her in surprise.

"I said disgraceful, isn't it?" said the manageress.

Hugh Drummond looked up quickly.

"We'll replace the whole fire," he agreed quickly.

"That's what I call service !" He was favoured

with a beam which split her face. "And goodness knows we haven't had any service for years. A sensible man like you is very welcome, I'm sure. Not all who come round here know their jobs. And very gratifying for this young lady, to know she'll have a really good fire if she decides to stay on for the winter. . . ."

"Oh, it would be lovely," said Cynthia quickly, "but I don't think I'll be staying all that time. . . ."

"No? Well, don't forget the coffee, then . . . you've just time. Only sixpence extra. . . ."

She swept Drummond out of the room.

"New guest?" he hazarded.

"Arrived this morning." She told him. "But she won't be staying long unless she books over the winter. We believe in residents in this establishment."

"Of course," agreed Drummond.

All his speculative thoughts were halted on entering the next—and last—room. His heart gave an excited little leap as he recognised the suit-case by the dressing-table. Yes, there was no mistake: its fellow was by the wardrobe.

But outwardly as calm as before, he walked over to the fireplace and knelt down.

"No better than the last one," announced the manageress.

"Oh, I wouldn't quite say that. . . ."

The manageress resisted her inclination to warn him that he'd better. After all, he had been very accommodating, and he had remarkable manners . . . still, the visit of such a willing official should not be allowed to end until the very last concession had been agreed. The business instinct triumphed over her appreciation of his manners.

"Have a good look."

"Yes, I am." Drummond looked up, an apologetic expression on his face. "You haven't got a small screw-driver, have you? I'm afraid I've mislaid mine. . . ."

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It worked. She nodded, and left the room. He heard the sound of her footsteps as she moved quickly down the passage.

The slow movements of the accommodating official then gave place to hectic, but absolutely silent, speed. Hugh Drummond went quickly through every drawer in that room. His fingers sought out every corner, but he was very careful to leave no trace of his inquisitiveness.

He was searching for a document or letter, and he found none. The suit-cases had been only partially unpacked : she does not expect to stay long, he said to himself. But there was nothing in either of them to indicate any name, or indeed anything but a drab personality. Hugh Drummond laughed to himself : trust Irma to play the part whole-heartedly, or not at all. . . .

He was back kneeling by the fire when the manageress returned. He took the proffered tool, and then realised with a slight shock that there was no screw in sight. He tapped one of the fuel bars pensively, and it promptly cracked in two.

" Ah ! " said the dragon watching him, with no attempt to conceal her satisfaction.

Hugh Drummond shook his head sorrowfully.

" You was right and I was wrong," he admitted handsomely. " Who's in here ? They won't be able to use this fire till I get the men round. . . . "

" It's another new guest, so it doesn't matter," she told him, and added firmly. " And it's far too early in the year for fires just now. "

" I hope it's not an old lady who may need luxuries. "

" Not so old as all that. "

Bother, said Drummond to himself. She talks too much, yet she won't say what I want her to tell me ! He handed back the screwdriver, and got out his notebook.

"New fires in . . . let's see . . . Miss Baxter's room, and Mrs. . . .?"

"Mrs. Benton. But just put seventeen and eighteen."

"Seventeen and eighteen it is."

Hugh Drummond put away his notebook.

"Mrs. Benton? I've heard that name before, somewhere. Wasn't she in the papers?"

The manageress became more dragonlike than ever. She drew herself up: evidently discussing her guests with passing officials—even as accommodating and well-mannered as this one—was not in the code.

"I hardly think it likely," she said icily. "Mrs. Benton is a very respectable widow, just returned from abroad, who would be horrified to have her name bandied about by the yellow press."

That's all you know, grinned Drummond to himself.

"I read *The Times*," he told her.

"Really?" she bridled, and it startled him. "Fancy, now. . . ."

There were no more rooms to look at, and Drummond realised that his opportunities were vanishing. But as they went downstairs, he tried once more.

"What does a lady like Mrs. Benton do with herself all day? Must be a dull life, having just too much money. . . ."

"So you're a philosopher, eh, young man?" The dragon, having achieved her ends, was becoming expansive. "Well, I agree with you. They sit about and knit, or crochet, or some work of that sort. They very seldom go out . . . live most unhealthy lives. . . ."

"Waiting for death?"

"Oh, come!" She gave him a weak smile. "Not quite as bad as that."

"Do they have visitors?"

"Not many. But it's funny you should say that . . . that Mrs. Benton has had two already."

"Not really!"

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"Yes. A month's ration for most of the others. Two very dark gentlemen. . . ."

"Not coloured gents?"

The dragon shivered, and snorted.

"Not likely ! As if I'd allow niggers into my lounge ! No, just black . . . I mean, very dark-haired men, with rather sallow skins. Foreigners. The one who gave his name had a 'ski' at the end of it."

"Well, well. . . ."

"Quite." The dragon sniffed. "I don't hold with foreigners myself. You can't understand them, except Americans—and then only every second word. Well, you'll get everything done as soon as possible, won't you?"

Hugh Drummond realised that he had been shepherded to the front door.

"You can rely on it," he said.

"I'm sure I can," she told him. "Good morning."

The next moment he found a florin in his hand. He raised his elderly bowler with dignity, and ambled off.

It took a great deal of will-power to resist visiting the local and spending that florin at once. But Hugh Drummond knew that he could not take the chance. And in any case, Peter Darrell might just be back. Drummond was more than ever interested in the girl Cynthia's references. . . .

He took rather a circuitous route to cover the few yards back to his hotel and realised half-way through the elaborate manoeuvre that it was really totally unnecessary. In his character of inspector of gas equipment he could well be visiting his own place in the course of duty. Still, no harm done. If she had by any chance been watching from that lounge window, he had gone far enough down the street to pass from her sight . . . and, he hoped, from any idle curiosity.

The return to his room was accomplished without being challenged, much to his relief. But it gave him

a little to think of, the ease with which someone of sinister purpose—set on a spot of loose cash, perhaps, or a trinket or two—could reach the bedrooms of such places. As he opened his door, he saw that both Peter Darrell and Algy Longworth were waiting for him.

“Hugh!” burst out Longworth. “She’s gone!”

There was something rather comical about his evident consternation. Of course, to Algy Longworth, reflected Drummond, the loss of a blonde was a blighting matter.

“Not really!”

“She has! Disappeared! The hotel don’t know where she’s gone to. All they know is that she packed up early this morning and vanished, saying she was going for a holiday.”

“Sensible girl.”

“But, Hugh, it’s suspicious! Peter says . . .”

Hugh Drummond laughed, as he busied himself taking off his shiny blue suit.

“Let Peter say it, then. . . .”

Darrell took the cue promptly.

“McIver was helpful as usual, Hugh, but I think he’s getting a bit nervy about us. He doesn’t altogether like our ‘mischief,’ as he calls it. Still, he checked on the girl with his Bayswater locals, and it proved an easy job. She’s apparently pretty well known in those parts. Daughter of the owner of the Royal Hotel, and lives there with her father and mother. She’s an actress of sorts as well: occasionally gets small parts in the West End, does a lot of understudying. Very popular at all the local charity shows, where she’s always ready to appear, and do what the local sergeant describes as a grand turn. It was obvious he was a fan.”

Pulling his trousers off, Drummond glanced at Longworth.

“But that’s excellent, Algy! What are you worrying about?”

"She's their daughter ! Child of the house, so to speak."

"Yes . . . ?"

"They must have known where she was ! Why make a mystery of it !"

"Well, Algy," said Drummond genially, "if they're anxious, you'll be able to relieve their minds."

"What ?"

"But I don't agree with you. You're just a masher to the hotel. She's probably got lots trailing around, perhaps including the sergeant of police. No doubt strict instructions were left with the staff to head off types like you."

"But, I say . . . !"

"Why shouldn't she take a holiday, free from the embarrassing attentions of streaks of impertinence, if she wants to . . . although I must say I can't quite make out why she should choose to spend it in that hotel opposite, in the very next room to Irma."

"What !"

It was Peter Darrell who had spoken, but Algy Longworth jumped to his feet in his excitement.

"In *there* . . . with Irma ?"

"She was. I promised her a new gas fire."

Briefly, as he completed his change, Hugh Drummond told them the full story of his discoveries during his tour with the dragon. There was a long pause when he finished.

"I can't quite make out that girl," said Darrell slowly.

"She's been given a wonderful reference," remarked Longworth, "and she's got the face of an angel."

"What about her figure ?" smiled Drummond.

"That's very worldly."

"Girls with the faces of angels," said Darrell, "often turn out devils."

"If you turn them out, of course they do." Long-

worth looked quite annoyed. "You can't scorn blondes—they react violently."

"I gather you're in favour?" enquired Drummond mildly.

Algy Longworth looked at him in surprise.

"In favour of what?"

"Using her. . . ."

Peter Darrell sat up abruptly.

"Hugh! You can't trust her on that evidence alone! Remember Jack Fortescue* . . . he was vouched for too!"

"I haven't forgotten that bounder!" There was a grim expression on Hugh Drummond's face. "But there's no denying that if the girl is on the level, she could be very useful. And I love her spirit, once again if she's on the level. We were a bit cold to her last night, so she goes in to find out for herself. Private enterprise with a vengeance, and it's that sort of incentive that makes the world go round. But, as Peter very rightly points out, the best of references can fall down, particularly with Irma in the background. She planted the unmentionable Jack Fortescue on us, and so she could be trying to plant a Cynthia Evershed. . . ."

"No."

It was Longworth who had spoken. Anxiously, Peter Darrell cut in.

"Algy, you dazzled ass! Can't you see . . . ?"

"No."

Hugh Drummond was looking at him closely.

"Go on, Algy! Why not?"

"Because, since Irma fondly imagines you are out of action in Vevey, there's no you here to plant someone on, if you get what I mean."

"I do." Drummond laughed. "Point number one for Cynthia. But, Algy, although it's convincing, it's not conclusive. There's just the vague chance that,

* See *Bulldog Drummond Stands Fast*.

having gone to unprecedented trouble to get me occupied elsewhere, she may be making the precautions one hundred per cent. by having you two looked after in my absence."

"And who more suitable than this ravishing blonde?" said Darrell triumphantly, eyeing Longworth.

"I can't believe it!"

"You mean you don't want to believe it." Drummond corrected Longworth gently. "Don't forget, Algy, that she was connected with the Mason performance . . . although I quickly add in a manner which might be perfectly innocent. But the facts are on the record, and we can't ignore anything . . . not after the Fortescue fiasco."

"Hear, hear!" said Darrell.

"But, Peter, I don't want to believe the worst any more than Algy does!"

"Hear, hear!" said Longworth, eyeing Darrell.

"Just think how useful that girl could be, established in the enemy's camp. She could check on all the visitors, perhaps even become friendly with the sweetly dull Mrs. Benton herself! Frankly, chaps, I'm rather worried about those visitors, whose names ended in 'ski.' And any others she may have in the future. The Lord knows what devilry is being planned in soft voices in the corner of that innocent lounge. Sorry to appear a trifle conceited, but Irma's gone to infinite pains to be left alone this time . . . whatever she's busy on, must be big."

It was a sobering thought, and Longworth and Darrell were quick to appreciate it.

"Yes," said Darrell unwillingly. "Cynthia could, of course, be a great asset—if she's on the level. But if she's not, just think of the damage! Irma—just as she had the last time—would have first-hand, up to the minute information of everything we were thinking and doing."

"And I have a feeling," said Drummond seriously,

"that she'd strike straight and quick this time. Irma learns lessons quickly, and this show promises to be too big even for her to take chances. . . ."

"So what?" asked Longworth.

Drummond and Darrell looked at him.

"Well?"

"So what?"

"So what what?" asked Darrell.

"I'm asking you. Personally, I haven't the faintest idea."

There was a sharp knock at the door. Drummond went and opened it, and found himself confronted with the plump waitress he had been unable not to notice at breakfast that morning.

"Note for you, sir."

"Oh?" Hugh Drummond took it. "How did this arrive?"

"By hand."

"Yes, obviously." Drummond contrived a smile.

"But who brought it?"

"Dunno," said the girl. "The porter asked me to bring it upstairs."

"Did the porter look dazzled?" asked Longworth.

She gaped at him.

"Sir?"

"Skip it, the gentleman's loopy," smiled Drummond.

"Thanks. . . ."

He slipped her a sixpence, and shut the door again. They watched him as he opened the envelope and read the note. He looked up suddenly, a grin on his face, excitement in his eyes.

"*'She leaves here three o'clock this afternoon by car,'*" he read aloud.

"Is that all?"

"It's enough, isn't it?"

"Signed with love and kisses?" Longworth asked.

"Not even initials."

"Hugh," said Darrell quietly, "you . . . do realise . . . ?"

Hugh Drummond laughed gaily.

"Fully, Peter ! If she's with us, it's invaluable. If she's against us, it's a trap."

"What'll we do ?" asked Longworth.

"It's an even money chance," said Hugh Drummond.

"Let's go and find out. . . ."

15: IN WHICH A COP LOSES HIS COURTESY

VERY punctually at three o'clock a large Packard limousine drew up outside the dragon's establishment. Mrs. Benton had evidently been ready and waiting, for the driver only had time to get out and trot up the steps when she appeared at the top of them. The driver, smartly dressed in chauffeur's uniform, took the cases out and put them away in the car. He then held the door open for Mrs. Benton to enter : she did so, with a smile and a wave of the hand to the dragon standing by the door. The dragon smiled back, palely : her disapproval of guests who arrived one minute and left the next was evident from her expression. Hugh Drummond, watching from another car fifty yards up the street, wondered if she were thinking of the new gas fire for room eighteen . . . and perhaps seventeen as well ?

Hugh Drummond was not in the Rolls-Bentley, nor was he at the wheel. It had been decided that to use Drummond's car—well-known to Irma—would be asking for trouble : unless, of course, they were being taken for a ride, when nothing would matter except a quick wit at the dangerous moment. But they had to work

on the assumption that all was well, and so it had been decided to use Algy Longworth's new sports model which Irma could not know by sight. As was fitting, Longworth was driving, with Darrell seated beside him, and Hugh Drummond had folded his powerful frame into the back seat scarcely intended, by the makers, for anyone quite so large. Longworth and Darrell were in normal country clothes: Drummond was roughly clad in thick, labourer's clothing, a dirty cloth cap pulled well over his eyes. This was with no definite plan in mind, but merely to provide some sort of cover should an occasion arise when he might wish to do a little scouting. . . .

"It's the same Packard," murmured Darrell.

"Yes," said Drummond softly. "I noticed that."

"It's a point in Cynthia's favour," suggested Longworth.

Darrell glanced at him.

"Why?"

"Shows Irma's not worried about recognition, or afraid of being connected with Jenner."

"She wouldn't be worried if this is a trap. Matter of fact, it would pay her to make it easy for us to follow her."

"Don't frighten me, Peter," said Longworth shortly.

"I'm of a nervous disposition."

Hugh Drummond, at the back, laughed quietly to himself. He could not imagine anyone less nervous in a crisis than Algy Longworth, unless perhaps Peter Darrell was his equal.

"They're off," said Darrell sharply.

"So are we," said Longworth, letting in the clutch.

"Tell them I died bravely chasing the foe with flaming sword and frightful screams."

As they passed the hotel Drummond glanced up. The dragon had turned, and was returning to her fold. He looked searchingly at the windows, but could find no trace of Cynthia Evershed's peering face. He had

half expected to see her peeping from some curtained corner to confirm whether or not they had acted on her message. But there was no sign of her. . . .

The car in front led them in a leisurely manner towards the Great West Road. Algy Longworth kept a respectful interval between them, consistent with the possible necessity for sudden acceleration should they decide to make an abrupt dive down a side-street. But the driver of the Packard made no attempt at all to play any tricks. This significant fact was not lost on any of the three men following in the sports car. It was quite clear that Irma was in no way worried : but, as Darrell had pointed out, this could not be assumed to be a good sign. . . .

They reached the Great West Road, and then the driver of the Packard did open out a little. But he drove steadily and evenly, if fast, and Longworth had no trouble in keeping his distance. Past Heston, the Packard took the right fork.

"Did we ever find out who that Yank belongs to?" asked Longworth.

"Yes," Drummond told him. "A gent who lives in Hampstead. Nothing known against him except that he's an intellectual of sorts. Their story—tactfully elicited—was that he'd lent it to his old friend Jenner."

"Nice man," said Darrell.

But they said no more, for conversation was beginning to be difficult with the increasing rush of wind as Longworth found himself forced to accelerate. The Packard was putting on speed now, and beginning totally to disregard the village thirty-mile limits. Longworth's sports model had the speed to hold the Packard, but it required a good deal of skilful driving to achieve this end.

"You're a nice make-weight, Hugh." Longworth laughed happily. "I must get a large bag of cement to steady her, when you're not here. . . ."

The driver of the Packard knew his job: he was controlling the big car well. But he was certainly taking chances with the law, and Longworth began to wonder at the unexpected hurry. There had been no sign of haste in the earlier stages of the journey.

They heard Drummond shout at them.

"Look out! Speed cop."

"That's all very well!" complained Longworth, keeping his foot down. "I can't drive legally without losing them. . . .

Darrell turned round.

"Where is he, Hugh?"

"Following. I think he's after us. He looks like trying to overtake."

As if to make things more difficult, the Packard had now reached a straight vista of road, and proceeded to go faster still.

"Hell!" said Longworth feelingly.

He heard Drummond's voice.

"Yes, he's coming. Listen, chaps, leave this to me. If he makes us stop, I'm a tramp you're giving a lift to. Talk to him, argue, but don't tell that you're following the Packard, of course. When I disappear, don't follow. When you've got rid of him, go to the 'Crown,' which is a bit farther along this road—good pub, I know it—and wait for a telephone call. Here he comes!"

Algy Longworth felt far from happy: this seemed the silliest way imaginable to lose trace of Irma! What a rotten piece of luck! Still, no use worrying: old Hugh seemed to have some stunt ready to deal with the emergency. No use ever worrying unless Hugh worried with you. . . .

With a great roar, the immensely powerful motor bicycle got abreast of them. The officer's signals were explicit: draw up on the left side of the road. He then swung out, and took position in front of them, gradually braking as Longworth followed suit. They

came to a standstill, Longworth's agonised eyes on the big limousine rapidly disappearing down the road before them. . . .

The policeman got off his bicycle, and came towards them in a deliberate manner. He approached Longworth in the driving seat, and stood beside the car.

"Practising for Brooklands?" he asked pleasantly. "Because that's a waste of time: there isn't any Brooklands any more."

"Look, officer," said Longworth urgently. "Why pick on me? Why not nab that large rich American tourer in front?"

"Much bigger game," advised Peter Darrell. "They could pay almost any fine."

"Five bob's my limit," Longworth told him. "If it's more, I can't take up the option."

"Nice car, this," said the policeman admiringly. "New?"

"This year."

"Done much with it?"

"Only two chickens so far."

The policeman laughed quite pleasantly, and looked at the speedometer.

"Seven thousand already! Where do you get your petrol? Don't answer, that's not official. But a nice new car like this oughtn't to be abused."

Longworth glanced down the road: the Packard was out of sight. Lord luvaduck, what perfectly foul luck! He turned back to the officer of the law.

"You a courtesy c-policeman?"

"Who's that?" asked the officer unexpectedly.

Both Darrell and Peter looked round. They saw that Hugh Drummond had got out, and was ambling along the road. Darrell laughed.

"Just a chap we gave a lift to . . . looks as if you've scared him, officer."

The man laughed gaily.

"That lot like to steer clear of us. They seem to consider us their natural enemies, goodness knows why!" He laughed again. "Well, sir, what's the meaning of all this speeding? You've broken the law about eight times since I've been following you."

"Oh, no!" protested Longworth. "Seven probably, nine quite possibly. But not eight!"

The policeman looked at him narrowly.

"Now don't get funny, sir. That never helps. Name, please. . . ."

Algy Longworth sighed.

"Officer, would you really do that to me? Do you want to blemish a spotless reputation, without so much as a missing rear light chalked up against it? Surely not. Think of your wife and kiddies at home. Think of my wife and kiddies at my home. Think of what yours think of you. Think of what mine think of me. Not so much as a parking offence, they shout modestly, their heads raised to meet all comers proudly. Not even . . ."

"Finished?" inquired the policeman patiently.

"Yes."

"Right. Name, please. . . ."

Algy Longworth suddenly became aware that Peter Darrell's elbow was gently prodding his ribs. He just heard Darrell's excited whisper: "For God's sake, keep it up! Don't let him look at Hugh!"

"You really mean it? Haven't you any of the charitable Yuletide feeling . . .?"

"This isn't Christmas."

"No, but Christmas is coming."

"So's a summons. For the last time, are you going to give me your name?"

"I wasn't driving dangerously."

"Who said you were?"

"I thought you did."

"You thought wrong. It's speeding I'm putting you

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in for. Now don't think so much, just give me your name. . . ."

"Putting me in where?" said Longworth desperately.

"It's beginning to look like gaol," said the policeman, evidently no longer amused. "*Name, please.*"

"A for Arthur, L for London, G for George, Y for yellow. Then you leave a space, and go on with L for London, O for orange, N for nobody . . ."

A sudden shattering roar cut him short. Darrell gave a weak laugh, and subsided in a relaxed attitude. There was nothing relaxed, however, about the policeman.

His first reaction had been to jump about a foot into the air. Then, as he came down and as an inkling of the truth dawned upon his startled intelligence, he turned and set off at a brisk pace towards the spot where he had left his motor bicycle. But not towards his motor bicycle itself, for that was roaring away down the road, Hugh Drummond in the saddle, in hectic pursuit of the big American limousine. . . .

The policeman stopped hesitatingly for a moment. Then, a remarkable shade of purple, he turned and ran back towards the sports car.

"Don't say it," advised Longworth. "It would be a relief, I know, but you'll regret it afterwards. If I were you . . . hey, where are you going?"

The policeman was scrambling into the seat so recently vacated by Drummond.

"Chase the blighter!" he panted. "Catch him. My word, I'll skin him alive!"

"Good," said Longworth, doing nothing. "I've always wanted to see somebody skinned alive. The psychiatrists say it's because my nurse . . ."

"Chase him!" screamed the outraged officer.

"Certainly," said Longworth politely. "Who would have thought, when we picked the poor fellow up, that he would prove to be a courtesy cop's motor-bike abductor! It just shows you never can tell who will

thumb you nowadays. What's the matter with this car? The old thumbers wanted lifts. Why won't the darned thing start? The new thumbers are just looking for business. I suppose he chose a sports car . . . funny she won't start . . . as the most likely to attract a courtesy cop's attention. I say, officer, I don't think this car is going to start."

"She must be overheated," said Peter Darrell chokingly. "We'll have to wait."

Darrell could only just pronounce the words: Longworth's remarkable verbal performance, while struggling with a self-starter which was trying manfully with no chance at all . . . you have to have switched the ignition on, for a starter to do its stuff . . . struck him as being superbly rich.

The policeman gave way to a remarkable flow of language, every word specially selected. Algy Longworth turned round slowly and stared at him in admiration.

"That's art!" he said, awed.

But the artist got down to sordid facts.

"Why won't the car start?"

"She's temperamental," explained Longworth. "Always has been. Remarkable thing, because I knew her father and mother, and they were the most placid. . . ."

But the officer was not listening, which was perhaps just as well: his complexion had changed from purple to bright red. He had heard another car approaching, and he leapt from Longworth's into the middle of the road. With a screaming of brakes, the newcomer—an elderly cabriolet—pulled up. To the horror of its owner, who looked at least a duchess, the policeman leapt in beside the chauffeur and waved him on, speaking excitedly. Loose at last from the restrictions of his scandalised mistress, the chauffeur set out happily. The car swayed off crazily. . . .

"I don't believe he even got our number!" roared Darrell.

"He didn't! And only my first name!" yelled Longworth. "Oh, my sainted aunt!"

Neither were capable of further speech for a few minutes, but at least Peter Darrell regained control.

"I say, Algy! He's got no chance with that old thing!"

"None. A most dangerous top of about fifty-five, I should think. But Hugh has: that bike will do about a hundred."

"He's probably in sight of Irma by now."

"Must be. Christmas, I feel weak!"

"You've a right to, Algy." Peter Darrell spoke ungrudgingly. "You were, frankly, grand."

"Thanks, pal. I couldn't think what was going on, and I daren't look once you nudged me."

Peter Darrell spoke seriously.

"We'd better be getting along, to find the 'Crown'."

"Yes."

Longworth switched on, and the car started at the first touch. He laughed merrily. Then he let in the clutch, and they moved off smoothly.

Three miles farther along they found the "Crown." As Hugh Drummond had said, it was a good pub. They mentioned his name speculatively, and struck an inner: they were taken straight into mine host's private room. The beer was excellent.

16: IN WHICH MRS. BENTON STOKES UP

HUGH DRUMMOND laughed gaily as he tore along the road, the powerful engine responding gallantly to his urgency. Bad luck on the copper, of course:

and he wondered momentarily how Peter Darrell and Algy Longworth would manage him. Not that he had any doubts on the outcome: that pair could take charge of a school of infuriated lunatics let loose, if it were ever necessary. Longworth's infinite capacity for idle chatter, and Darrell's no less devastating obstinacy, combined to make a most formidable combination. No doubt it would be necessary to get McIver's help finally to smooth over their high-handed action. But the Inspector would be only too delighted to help in any way, if by their activities—no matter how high-handed—they delivered the notorious Irma Peterson into his tender care. . . .

Bother! Surely he should be catching sight of the big Packard soon? It had certainly been travelling, but then so most indisputably was he. He glanced at the speedometer, and saw that he was tearing along at between seventy and eighty miles an hour. It was not an occupation he exactly relished—at that speed small road surface faults assumed rather disturbing and most uncomfortable proportions—still, the bicycle was holding the road comparatively well. He slowed slightly for a bend, and as he shot round it, breathed a sigh of satisfied relief. The Packard was progressing, now at a much more dignified speed, not very far in front of him.

As he suited his own speed to theirs in front, it occurred to Hugh Drummond that possibly the advent of the policeman had been a blessing in disguise. It had not seemed so at first, of course. But, just supposing that Irma, perhaps through force of habit, had glanced behind her, and observed the sports car following, she might have got suspicious if this had gone on for too long. But her suspicions now would be allayed: the appearance of a motor bicycle was far too commonplace to be an anxiety, and there was nothing to point to any connection between the sports car and the

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motor-bike. Now that he was happily sitting on Irma's tail again, Hugh Drummond was inclined to bless that courteous copper . . . Drummond laughed aloud as he wondered if a spot of the courtesy had got worn off by now. . . .

These were good bikes, there could be no question of that. Hotted up, no doubt, just as were the police cars. Perhaps a trifle heavy, but a nice solid job which inspired confidence. Hugh Drummond was really enjoying himself very much indeed. It was a long time since he had piloted a motor bicycle, and he shared not a little of the thrill of the youths he so often saw flashing through the traffic. Must remember not to curse them indiscriminately in the future, he told himself. Make a note not to become a four-wheel snob without real provocation.

Hullo, what was happening in front? Drummond throttled down in order to retain a safe distance. He was partially disguised, of course: the rough clothes and the reversed corblimey cap were a safeguard, but he must not get near enough for his features to become too recognisable. The Packard was slowing down with a vengeance, scarcely crawling now. Hugh Drummond came to a quick decision: his only alternatives were to accelerate and flash past, or to stop. He pulled up quickly well into the side of the road, jumped off, and knelt down by his front wheel, seemingly examining it. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he kept an alert watch on the car in front.

When it had practically come to a standstill, the reason became obvious. It turned very sharply into a narrow gate concealed by some trees on the right of the road. As it passed out of sight, Drummond could hear it accelerate again, presumably as it negotiated some avenue or drive.

Pushing the heavy bicycle well off the road, up against a low hedge on the verge, where it would be less notice-

able although by no means out of sight, Drummond crossed the road swiftly. He ran up the other side, pausing momentarily when he reached the open gate. There was a small lodge by the gate: beyond it, the well-kept drive disappeared in a curve to the left. There was smoke coming from the only chimney of the lodge: evidently it was occupied.

All this Hugh Drummond took in at a glance. Not so good, he told himself. I don't think I'd better make the acquaintance of the inhabitants of that lodge just yet. He retired a few yards into the ditch, after making certain that there was no one on the road to observe his highly suspicious behaviour. He must be careful about that: he was not dressed to be able convincingly to claim innocent eccentricity, should he be challenged. But the converse was an asset: he was suitably dressed to be able convincingly to claim that the avaricious curiosity of his kind was responsible for his presence near the house, should he be observed. He might so easily be after an egg or two, or even a cockerel: and most likely the sequel to that would be no worse than a running commentary from an indignant dog. . . . Such an eventuality held no terrors for Drummond: he had a remarkable way with dogs.

But how to get near the house that must be at the end of the drive? He peered through the hedge, and found himself gazing at the small garden belonging to the lodge. It was neat and nicely kept. And it had a beautifully thick hedge running up its length on his right-hand side.

Drummond moved quickly and silently back along the ditch until he judged that the hedge would be in between himself and the lodge. Then he hoisted himself over the fence defending the private property from the road, thanking providence for the trees which provided some sort of cover. He made off rapidly along the hedge, and saw to his relief that the trees, although rather

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more scattered than he could have wished, flanked the drive. It was also a pleasant factor to find that he was now out of sight from the road, for the ground ran sharply downhill from the fence.

Making good use of the trees, Drummond moved rapidly along, keeping the drive a few yards to his left. Once round the bend which concealed it from the road, he found himself in sight of the house. He went forward more cautiously now, until he reached a position whence he could take stock of the lie of the land.

A few trees were about, and a few large rhododendron bushes, from under one of which he was now appreciating the situation. Immediately in front of him was a lawn, with an ornamental bird-bath affair in its centre. The house lay beyond that : a low, rambling building not without attraction. A frontal approach was out of the question, but there was a certain amount to observe going on by the front door, so Hugh Drummond postponed his geographical survey for a few moments. . . .

The Packard was drawn up by the front door. Irma had evidently already entered the house, but the chauffeur was unloading the two suit-cases, and he carried them through the door out of sight within the house. He returned empty-handed at once, however, and got back into the driving seat. The car moved off, but only for a few yards straight on : then it stopped again opposite a building which was obviously the garage. The chauffeur descended, opened the wide doors, returned to the car and drove it through into the garage. And, his quick glance roving round and about, Hugh Drummond saw that a detour could lead him, with every chance of remaining unobserved, right up to the back of that garage, for a shrubbery ran conveniently round the lawn on that side. Good : and I wonder what the window high up above the large doors means ? Might well be a loft, or even a room, above the garage . . . ?

Drummond shifted his attention to the other side of the lawn. Hopeless that way : as open as the front of the house. Before I leave, Drummond told himself, I must have a look at the other side of the house. Might as well be fully acquainted with the topography of the place : it'll save a reconnaissance later. . . .

His eyes were attracted back to the garage by the reappearance of the chauffeur, who closed the doors behind him, and then made off round a path close to the main building, evidently on his way to the back door, and no doubt to his tea. . . .

The thought brought a query to Drummond's mind : had Peter and Algy found the "Crown" yet, he wondered : and if so, had mine jolly host reacted with something stronger than tea? He could have done with a snorter himself. . . .

No sooner had the chauffeur vanished beyond the house, than Drummond was also on the move. He went very fast but with infinite care, a rare combination of gifts for a man of his outsize. Gifts they were, of course : but Hugh Drummond had perfected his initial advantages by the sweat of his brow in hard practice. One moment he was lying under the rhododendron bush, the next moment he was not. And only a few seconds later he was skirting the lawn, under cover of the shrubbery, and even the birds were hushed into shocked silence by the abrupt discovery that he was already among them.

There was a side door to the garage. It was rather unpleasantly situated in full view from two of the windows of the house. Hugh Drummond paused within the edge of the shrubbery, three yards from that door.

If the room, or whatever it was, above the garage was occupied, it was reasonable to suppose that it was the chauffeur's flat. Or at any rate, living-room. And the chauffeur had gone into the house for his tea. And

that window above the garage gave a perfectly splendid view of the precincts, besides providing cover. . . .

Drummond hesitated no longer. In one gliding movement he left the shelter of the shrubbery and reached the door. It yielded to his touch, and in the next moment he was through. He closed the door behind him in the same movement. He turned and found himself in the back of the garage, just by the rear wing of the Packard, and facing a wooden stairway which led upwards.

The idea of putting the great car temporarily out of action occurred to him : if he had to make a sudden getaway, it might be useful to prevent too rapid a chase. But second thoughts prevailed : there was no particular reason to suppose that such a situation would arise, and if it didn't, then the tampering with the car would indicate that some unauthorised person had been around. Not at all a good thing to suggest to Irma, specially an Irma at present delightfully ignorant that she was under observation. No, leave the car alone. . . .

Hoping that there was no creaking board—because, of course, there still might be someone in that space upstairs—Hugh Drummond started to ascend the stairway. He did it fast and soundlessly, as he did everything when in action, a direct contrast to his behaviour in more leisured moments. This contrast had proved unbelievable, and therefore dangerous, to new opponents in the past. Drummond was grinning happily as he went : the opportunity for action pleased him hugely.

There was another door at the top of the stairs, and it was shut. Bother, said Hugh Drummond to himself. Well, there's no point in putting off the displeasing moment : here goes !

He opened the door, and stood gazing into the empty and bare, room. No one lived here, obviously. There was no furniture anywhere, and the boards of the floor were none too clean. The room did not seem to be

used even to store things. Hugh Drummond frowned slightly. He would have preferred curtains by that useful window. As it was, it would be very hard not to be conspicuous when looking out.

He walked half-way into the room, and then, dropping on to his hands and knees, completed his journey on all fours. He was careful to keep his head below the level of the window, as he approached it. Then, using the wall as much as possible, he raised himself very slowly, with great patience, until his eyes were level with the sill.

At once he realised a most important fact: that window might prove a godsend. You could see from it right into what looked to be the principal living-room of the house. Seated by a cheerful fire, he could make out without difficulty the form of "Mrs. Benton" partaking of what looked like a very high tea. The sort of tea that in happier days used to follow a long day's shooting, or the second round of golf. The sort of tea that had boiled eggs to it, and had inspired a famous comedian's song. Hugh Drummond found himself suddenly jealous, and his mouth watered at the lovely, forgotten sight.

As far as he could see, Irma was alone. But this was no certainty, for from his angle he could, of course, only see a portion of the room. But the long window of that pleasant, downstairs room gave him a very fair view, and as he watched, a butler entered into the line of vision with a silver dish complete with cover, which he placed on the small table beside Irma before withdrawing. Hugh Drummond simply had to look away as she lifted that lid: muffins! How the wicked lived!

Well, the sooner Peter, Algy and himself set up a rota for a permanent look-out from that garage window, the better. A lot could be learned, especially by someone equipped with field-glasses, and the risk of discovery was small provided a certain caution was exercised.

The room was obviously disused : dust was everywhere. A couple of old sacks would be useful, to conceal the person on duty should anyone prove inquisitive : he was quite sure that no one of the regular household had any idea whether or not there were sacks—or anything else—up in that loft. Say two or three filled with something like sawdust to form a façade, and another couple to be suitably draped over the body . . . yes, that would be better. Mine host at the “Crown” would no doubt provide these, and—by Jove !—the field-glasses also, for he was a racing man !

Hugh Drummond considered whether or not to wait a little longer before going to the “Crown.” There might be something else to be observed by remaining until dark—not so very far away now—which might be useful. They could scarcely, in safety, take up their positions before dark, even if he could fetch Peter and Algy in the time. His mind was quickly made up : he would not remain there ; but neither would he at once fetch his friends. The other side of the house was still unknown to him, and if he could examine it in the daylight, it might be very useful to them all in the dark. Hugh Drummond possessed that sort of photographic memory which enabled him almost correctly to judge distances later, blindfolded, when he had once had a good, long look. And at the back of his mind was running the high hope that perhaps there might come the opportunity, later that night, of a personal journey of exploration into the house. Where Irma elected to stay, and in such obvious comfort, there was bound to be something or other to interest him.

Very softly—and after one last look at “Mrs. Benton” still plainly enjoying her tea—Hugh Drummond left the window, crossed the room, and was about to descend the stairs, when a slight noise from the garage below made him stiffen like a setter pointing a bird. He remained quite motionless, every sense on the alert. A

rat? Possibly. He waited, stock-still. The noise was repeated, rather louder this time. There was something below, no doubt of that. Something which was moving. Better have a look. . . .

Soundlessly, Drummond edged forward until he could see into the garage below him.

He saw a girl climbing stiffly out of the boot of the Packard. An extremely attractive girl, with her back towards him, giving him a splendid view of a mass of blonde curls. She bent slowly, and began to massage her legs with her hands.

Hugh Drummond completed the descent of the stairs wholly silently, and stood just behind her.

"Stiff?" he inquired softly.

The girl jumped a yard. Then she whipped round and faced him, her lovely face flushed with the shock.

"*You!*"

"I'm just as surprised to see you, Cynthia. Or should I say Miss Baxter?"

"You beast! Why did you frighten me?"

"It was sort of inevitable."

"I must say I'm awfully glad to see you."

He laughed gently.

"That's better!"

"This sort of life may be child's-play to you, but it frankly terrifies me."

"One gets used to it." Drummond nodded towards the open boot of the car. "Travel down in there?"

"Yes."

"Finished with it?"

"I hope for ever."

Hugh Drummond closed the boot softly.

"Can you walk yet?"

"Just."

"Up the stairs, then, but keep well back from the window above. This is no place to talk—can't see who may be coming."

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

He followed up close at her heels : he was pleased to see that although she moved stiffly, she was careful to be as silent as possible. He also noted with approval that she was not wearing the high-heeled shoes which he had dreaded, but a pair of sports shoes with nice, noiseless rubber soles.

They reached the room above, and Drummond took up station by the window. He kept the girl well in the background as they talked in soft voices, but he himself watched carefully against the advent of any intruder.

"You've got a lot to explain, young woman."

"So you got my note?"

"Yes."

"You know, when I was having that nightmare journey, the only thing that kept up my spirits was the thought that you'd almost certainly be somewhere just behind."

"Really?"

"Fact. Have you ever travelled in a boot?"

"Well . . . in a closed rumble seat."

"Delightful, isn't it? You get a really intimate idea of the road you travel on."

"You do."

"Full of fun! I tell you, I'm black and blue all over!"

"You must show Algy. But listen, girl . . . this isn't the way the conversation ought to be going at all!"

"No?"

"No. What the devil were you doing in that boot?"

"Seeing where she was going, of course."

Cynthia spoke simply : there could be no doubting the sincerity of her statement.

"But you'd already tipped us off. Surely that was our job?"

"Let you all disappear into the blue? Not likely! How would I have found you again?"

"Is that important?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence: then she smiled, and her expression carried a curious suggestion of anxiety.

"It is most important, to me. Do try to understand, Hugh Drummond . . . surely you of all people ought to be able to! Life is pretty dull, isn't it? Specially for a girl of imagination. If she doesn't seize her first chance of a bit of fun, with both hands, another may never come her way. . . ."

"You consider this sort of thing . . . a bit of fun?"

"Of course."

He laughed, a subdued but gay sound.

"We're going to get on, Cynthia. That's what we call it, too."

"Besides," she said suddenly, "you might have failed."

"Failed?"

"Yes. Had bad luck, or something, and lost the trail. Then I could have 'phoned you where she was."

"This is a dangerous game, Cynthia."

"Spice," said the girl.

"We'll go into that later. One more question . . . you've given one reason, but is there another . . .? Why are you doing all this?"

Again a look of anxiety, almost of pleading, came into her eyes.

"Can't you believe me? Because I've got my fingers hooked into that chance, and I'm not going to let go. Don't try to make me, please! You see, I had an idea—after you were so cold to me the other night—that I would have to prove my worth—sort of pay an entrance fee to your team. I'm trying to do it."

Hugh Drummond found himself genuinely wanting to pat her on that blonde head, and drive the anxiety from those appealing eyes. He had no doubt now of her sincerity, of whose side she was on. He had never

had any doubt from the moment he had seen her painfully getting out of the Packard's boot. It was quite ridiculous to suppose she would have been planted by Irma in the garage : that was carrying suspicion far too far, and giving Irma a supernatural intelligence. He believed now all that the girl had stated, and found this certainty pleasing. She had a grand, adventurous spirit, full of individual initiative, which it was a rare pleasure to meet.

"Provided the others agree, you've done it," he told her gently.

"But you're their leader?"

He smiled.

"You called us a team, and you were right. But, listen . . . all that later. For the moment, I want to use you . . . that all right with you?"

She nodded quickly.

"Simply grand," she said.

"Come over here—crawl as I did—and take a look."

She did as he told her.

"Look where?"

Unconsciously, she was whispering.

"Into that room."

She whistled softly.

"She's doing herself well ! Couldn't I?"

"Me too."

"Stoking up for something."

Hugh Drummond leaned forward sharply.

"What?"

"Well, look at those egg-shells . . . two, or I'm a Dutchwoman. And those cakes. . . ."

"They're muffins."

"That's as well. That's not tea, that's a meal. She doesn't expect any dinner. No woman would tuck into a tea like that if she was going to eat dinner ; her figure wouldn't stand for it. Does Mrs. Benton . . . I

mean your Irma . . . value her figure when she's herself?"

"You bet she does!"

"Then," said Cynthia emphatically, "she's stoking up, as I said."

"Which is a mouthful," conceded Hugh Drummond admiringly. How useful, at times, to have a girl around to give one the feminine point of view: such a deduction would never have occurred to him. "Look, Cynthia . . . d'you mind staying here alone?"

She laughed at him.

"I've been working alone . . . up to now," she reminded him.

"Good. It may be for some time . . .?"

"I'm under orders."

"Good girl. I've got to complete my recce, and it's urgent now . . . if you're right and Irma is up to something to-night. Then I'm going to beetle off and fetch the boys. We'll join you here . . . but not until after dark. I want you to keep watch and observe everything that happens—but for the lord's sake keep out of sight! Don't take one single, solitary chance . . . is that a promise?"

"Yes."

"Right."

"What do I do if she leaves here?"

"She won't," Drummond told her confidently. "This is no port of call; it's got all the signs of headquarters. She might leave for an hour or two, but I doubt whether we'll see the luggage again until the job is done . . . or we've stopped it."

"What job?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Cynthia. But it'll be dirty, darned dirty, or Irma wouldn't be here."

"So I do nothing if she goes?"

"Not a thing, except go on keeping watch."

"Very well."

He moved quickly to the door.

"I say . . ."

He turned.

"Yes?"

"Good luck . . . Hugh."

Drummond smiled.

"The same to you, with knobs on!"

She found herself alone.

17: IN WHICH IRMA PETERSON GETS HERSELF READY

IRMA PETERSON had thoroughly enjoyed her tea. True, it meant that she would have no dinner, but she was content enough to put up with that sort of minor inconvenience provided it expedited the business in hand. For some reason, she was more than usually anxious to get this particular job behind her. Not so much because of the money: she had plenty of that scattered round the world, in different banks and under many names. But perhaps because she recognised that it was more than usually dangerous, specially in a country like England so over-ridden with that ridiculous sense of what was sporting and what was not, and with that lamentable old school tie brand of sharp division between things done and not done. She had no illusions about the difficulty of her task, and the lack of psychological understanding on the part of her employers.

At any rate, they had evidently summed up her own character fairly well. This place they had provided was certainly ideally suited for her purpose, and sufficiently luxurious for her needs. It was nicely tucked away in the country, yet not too far from London.

It was quiet, just off the beaten track, and her visitors were not likely to be observed. The staff knew their jobs, and seemed to be discreet: she was assured that they could be relied upon in every way. Good . . . it was wonderful what money could achieve by way of loyalty!

The chauffeur had driven well. As a remarkably able driver herself, she was critical of others at the wheel, but this man was an obvious master of his art. That was a relief: it was tiring always to drive oneself, and she anticipated that she would have a good deal of motoring to do in the next few days. She had enjoyed the drive down from London: the country was looking lovely. She laughed to herself as she thought of Hugh Drummond also, no doubt, admiring the scenery, but of a very different sort . . . if he was well enough to look out of his window. The thought of Hugh Drummond ill was rather comical. Somehow, one did not connect that powerful frame with any of the human body's weaknesses. She picked up the message which had been handed to her by the butler on her arrival . . . the butler who, she had been told, was about the most accurate pistol shot in the country. A useful fellow, an ex-commando apparently, who certainly knew how to buttle as well. . . .

She glanced again at the message. *Our friend's temperature still soaring. No sign of life. His wife is proving a devoted nurse.* She laughed, lazily: Bulldog Drummond out of action, largely through her ingenuity, although aided and abetted, of course, by this providential bout of malaria. Just at the time when, of all the occasions when they had encountered each other, he would have particularly delighted in putting a spoke in her wheel. What fun! She wondered what those other two idiots were doing, Darrell and Longworth? Drinking themselves to death, no doubt, in one of those vast and snobbish clubs so beloved by the capitalistic

system . . . yes, she must practise that sort of talk ! Irma Peterson laughed gaily.

But it was odd how thoughts of Drummond came occasionally to haunt her, well though she knew that he was temporarily bedridden in an hotel room on the shores of the lake at Vevey. There was that moment of suspicion when in the car only an hour or so ago. She had thought, quite seriously too, that the sports car looked suspiciously as if it were trailing her, and her thoughts had immediately flown to Drummond. Absurd, of course ! The car had merely been travelling on the same road, and then must have branched off on its innocent journey, for it had disappeared. But it had given her quite a little shock. Stupid, she told herself severely : the danger of Drummond becoming an obsession, and therefore a weakness in her armour, was real. She could not, in all fairness, cavil at the condition which her employers had made in his regard. . . .

Irma Peterson looked at her watch. Time to prepare herself for her meeting, the first and possibly the most important. It was a pity that its anticipated length put dinner out of the question : she would have liked to see what the cook could do. The cakes, obviously home-made, had been excellent, and augured well for the future meals. Well, there would be time enough for that : now, the more she idled with luxurious thoughts, the less time was left for the necessary preparations. The first of her guests should be arriving in under an hour, the man who was going to brief her about the others. . . .

How touchy these wayward and perverted intellectuals were, to be sure ! She had been warned that she must play up to them : they were fanatics, of course, blindly playing a dangerous game of follow my leader through a maze dictated to them by rapacity and hate. Slaves of a system which had merely substituted one rotten

dictatorship for another, and privileged a different but equally brutal and avid few against exactly the same many. What fools! But she was on their side now, until the job was done, and the message which she brought them was expected to delight their obedient, puny hearts. Irma Peterson had her doubts: in other countries, quite possibly. But the British from the highest to the lowest simply did not do certain things: they just weren't done in England. However, it was up to her to light the torch, and perhaps it might prove less difficult than she imagined.

One thing had been impressed on her: very few of these men and women realised they had been bought. No doubt, and she smiled to herself with satisfaction, she was the most expensive purchase yet made, and that only for a season. . . .

She rose to her feet elegantly, walked to the hall and upstairs to her room. And as she went, she laughed out loud abruptly. What a funny thought! By conviction she and Hugh Drummond were on the same side . . . but what a difference enough money could make! To her, not to Drummond—that was why he was such a fool . . . !

The intriguing speculation came to her mind of what might have happened had she and Drummond thought along the same lines, and teamed up years ago . . . but a sudden, hard icy glint came into her eyes. Hugh Drummond had been responsible for the extermination of her beloved Carl Peterson. Some day, he would pay for that deed with his own life . . . and, she promised herself, she would see that the manner of his death would not be easy. . . .

18: IN WHICH MINE HOST IS MOST OBLIGING

"YOU win, Algy!"

The totally unexpected sound of Hugh Drummond's voice caused Longworth, who was finally disposing of a pint, to experience a certain nasal difficulty. After this had been accentuated by the well-meaning and enthusiastic application of slaps on the back from Darrell and mine host, Algy Longworth recovered sufficiently to demand an explanation.

"Eh, what?" he said.

But Hugh Drummond was now greeting mine host as a long-lost friend. Very cordial relations having been established, Drummond got down to business.

"Got any sacks, Mr. Parker?"

"Sacks, Captain! Them's rare things, nowadays!" Drummond laughed.

"I know they are. But I only want the loan of four or five. . . ."

"Only four or five!" Mine host registered pain and horror. "Well, I suppose it can be done. . . ."

"Two with sawdust in them?"

"Sawdust?" Mine host's eyebrows, a fine pair, shot up. "Haven't seen sawdust since the fourth Sunday in Lent. I could do a bit of rubbish . . .?"

"Splendid."

They eyed each other for a moment.

"No use asking what it's for, I suppose?"

"And a pair of field-glasses?"

"I see. None. Field-glasses, now. . . . You won't forget the Salisbury meeting in ten days' time?"

"You'll have them safely back for that," Drummond promised him.

"I wish I could refuse you something!" grumbled the worthy Parker, as he departed in search of Drummond's requirements.

Hugh Drummond smiled to the others.

"Good chap, Parker! Used to be a sergeant-major in my old lot of the first instalment. I gave him a swig from my flask when he looked like getting frost-bitten in Flanders, and he's never forgotten it. Well, to go back to where I came in, you win, Algy!"

"Most satisfactory news," said Longworth. "Now, would you mind explaining in detail, and words of one syllable only, exactly what you mean?"

Drummond told them. He gave a very quick and precise report of all that had happened since they had last seen him roaring away on the powerful motor-bike. They listened attentively until he had finished, and then Darrell told him of the fury of the courtesy copper. Then there was a momentary silence.

"Satisfied, Peter?"

Darrell looked up at Drummond.

"You are, obviously."

"Yes."

Darrell smiled.

"Then I'm happy to be, too."

"Are you, by any chance, talking of that queen of her sex, one Cynthia Evershed?" asked Longworth.

"We are."

"I should darned well think you are satisfied!" exclaimed Longworth. "She's done a terrific job, all on her own. Just think what she can do now with our support!"

"Yes," said Drummond slowly, "but the girl has thrown herself into this thing with her eyes veiled, Algy! We'll have to be careful of her: Irma's no scrupulous opponent, remember. . . ."

"I'll never forget that!"

". . . and the least we can do is to explain to

Cynthia exactly what she's up against. She may prefer to back out."

"Now that she's one of us," commented Darrell, "I must say I think that's highly unlikely."

Algy Longworth nodded approvingly.

"So do I," agreed Drummond. "But all the same—she's probably got no idea that there are people like Irma still around in this day and age. I wonder where Parker's got to . . . ?"

"Are we in a hurry?" asked Darrell.

"Yes. I don't like leaving her alone. . . ."

"Neither do I," said Longworth.

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"And, anyway, the more we keep Irma under our protective eye, the less mischief she's liable to get into."

"What are the bags for?" asked Longworth.

But he got no reply, for they heard the heavy steps of the bulky mine host as he returned to the room.

"I've put the sacks in the car, sir," he told Drummond. "Two filled, three empty. Here are the glasses. One for the road, Captain?"

"I believe," answered Drummond, "there might be just time. . . ."

"Short or long?"

"I won't have anything at all," announced Longworth, "unless it's a bitter. . . ."

The others agreed. The tankards were filled, and emptied. Some sandwiches were taken from a glass container and put away in some paper. The admirable Parker refused to accept any payment. The short argument that ensued left him obdurate. With many protestations of good will on all sides, the sports car began to move. . . .

"Hi!" suddenly called Drummond.

Longworth promptly stopped. Mine host narrowed the distance between them.

"Parker," said Drummond, "there happens to be a

policeman's motor-bicycle leaning up against your fence. Goodness knows how it got there, when the owner finds it."

Mine host winked.

"Goodness only knows!" he agreed, and added with relish. "You always were a one, Captain!"

They drove off. It was nearly dark now, but the night was starry, and gave promise of a useful moon. When they had covered a few miles, Hugh Drummond issued his orders:

"Gently, now, Algy. See the bend in front? Turn off your headlights, and draw in to the left: there's a field I marked down which has a nice big tree by its gate. That's our garage."

"Aye, aye, sir. Straight in?"

"Yes, but let Peter open the gate first. It saves damage."

They found the gate, and the car was soon safely parked in the comparatively concealing shadows from the large tree.

"Now, listen, chaps. Mark this place well, both of you . . . but particularly Algy."

"Marked," said Darrell.

"Ditto," said Longworth.

"You're the lucky one, Algy, to-night. You may even get some sleep."

"I need it," said Longworth emphatically. "You can't go blonding like last night without the strain taking it out of you a bit."

"You'll be blonding again."

"What!" said Darrell. "You'll break him, Hugh! You know how he hates it!"

"When we collect Cynthia, Algy, your job is to bring her back here, make her comfortable in your car—if that's a possibility—and then doss down beneath it, or anywhere very near that you choose."

"What'll you and Peter be doing?"

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

"Nothing, I should think. Just keeping a look-out from the garage window, and perhaps patrolling the grounds a trifle. Unfortunately it's Irma's move first, you see . . . we can only watch and wait, and be ready to step in, with our advantage of surprise, whenever the time is ripe. Now mark the trip well in your minds as we go : the next time you make it you'll be on your own. Don't expect help from Cynthia, Algy . . . she doesn't know the way. The journey's a bit round about, because we have to give the lodge a wide berth, and we have to use the only covered approach. There's a nasty few yards right at the end, with no cover, when we leave the shrubbery for the garage door. Otherwise it's fairly simple going, but I warn you, the shrubbery's carpeted with dry snapping twigs—so look out ! I'm doing the talking now, because there mustn't be any while we move. Any questions ? "

They both remained silent.

"Algy ? "

"Careful of lodge, use cover, avoid twigs, dodge moonlight in last few yards, collect Cynthia, dodge moonlight in first few yards, avoid twigs, use cover, careful of lodge, find car, tuck up Cynthia, select snug-gery, snore."

"Correct. Peter ? "

"Steer clear of lodge, use cover, careful of twigs, look out for last bit, up stairs, await orders."

"Good. I'll take one full and one empty sack. Peter the same. Algy the glasses, the sandwiches, and an empty. All set ? "

"How about leaving a sandwich or two here for Cynthia ? " suggested Longworth.

"Sound," Drummond agreed.

Longworth busied himself with the paper parcel.

"All set," he answered, looking up.

"Let's go."

And then, for Darrell and Longworth, began a hectic

twenty minutes. Both expert stalkers though they were, capable of moving more rapidly and more soundlessly than most, they were not in the same class as Hugh Drummond. To keep up with him, and still to exercise the necessary care in order to make no noise, was the hardest job that either of them knew, more especially at night. It was anxious work, for a false step might bring disaster, and if they failed to keep up with him, valuable time would be lost while he returned to direct them again. And all the time, Darrell and Longworth were busily noting landmarks, so that they would be able to use the same route when by themselves. Undoubtedly a tricky job, and both were relieved when at last Drummond, crouching in front of them, gave the signal to halt. Silently, the big man glided over to Longworth, and whispered in his ear.

"We're in the shrubbery just by the garage. You wait here, Algy. I'll bring her to you."

Longworth nodded assent: the alteration in the plan did make sense. Drummond took the things Longworth was carrying from him, and with a sign to Darrell to follow he abruptly disappeared from the shrubbery. Darrell moved in the same instant, and Longworth found himself alone. A thought suddenly struck him, and he cursed himself for not having thought to warn Drummond about it; but Hugh would probably think of it for himself . . . that blonde hair of Cynthia's would reflect the moonlight shockingly: he hoped she was wearing a hat, or had some dark scarf or something with which to cover it. . . .

Hugh Drummond reached the door, pushed it open, and slid through. He stood ready to shut it again as soon as Darrell joined him, and then he led the way up the stairs. It was very dark indeed in the garage, but as they entered the bare room above, the pale moonlight gave limited vision as it filtered through the window.

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

A sharp intake of breath came from the huddled figure by the window.

"It's all right, Cynthia. Hugh and Peter," murmured Drummond.

"Thank heavens you've come !"

Something in the urgency of her low tones told Drummond that she had something to say beyond natural relief at no longer being alone.

"Half a tick !" he told her, and deposited his burden in a corner. Darrell imitated him. Then both of them soundlessly joined the girl at her point of vantage. "What's up ?" he breathed.

"I don't know, but it looks like a reception."

"What's been happening ?"

"First," reported the girl, "the chauffeur gave me kittens by coming to get the car. Of course I thought he was coming to get me. He drove off, and was away for about half an hour. Then he came back, deposited someone at the house, and put the car away again. More fits for me, of course, until he left and went into the house himself. Then there was a nice quiet bit—about an hour, I'd say—until another car drove up. It disgorged its contents, four men. Other cars came, seven more. All had full houses, men and women but mostly men. The eight cars are parked in the drive now."

"And then ?"

"Nothing. They're using that room we could see into, but we can't now, of course. The moment they put the lights on, that butler chap pulled the curtains. And he made a careful job of it, too : not a streak to see through anywhere."

"Good girl !"

"I've done nothing, except contract convulsions whenever I see that chauffeur."

Hugh Drummond smiled.

"You've done enough to have a bite to eat, and get a spot of sleep. We want you fresh for to-morrow. . . ."

"I must say I am tired," she confessed.

"You've a right to be. Sixty miles in a boot is more than Mother Hubbard ever did. Listen, Cynthia! I'm taking you to Algy now. He'll guide you to our advanced headquarters. Don't talk until he talks to you, and be damn careful where you put your feet: you've got to try to make no sound. Have you got anything to cover your hair with?"

"Er . . . I don't think so. Why?"

"It's a bit too bright in this moonlight."

"Oh, I see." She thought for a moment. Then she suddenly laughed. "Turn round . . . you too, Peter."

They obeyed her, and in a moment or two heard her speak again.

"It's all right now."

Something silk, at least darker than her hair, was round her head.

"What's that?" asked Peter.

"Never you mind. I'm ready, Hugh."

Drummond spoke very low and very earnestly to Peter Darrell. Then he turned to the girl.

"Come along, Cynthia. After me. Do exactly as I do, and remember . . . mum's not only the word, it's everything."

"I'll do my best."

More slowly than he had in the reverse direction with Darrell, Hugh Drummond led Cynthia to the door, with sudden swiftness through it and across the dangerous space, and then into the shrubbery. Longworth seemed to rise up in the darkness beside them.

No word was spoken. At a sign from Drummond, Algy Longworth led the girl away. Hugh Drummond watched them until the night swallowed them up, noting with approval the silent lightness of her step as she followed her guide. Then he turned, and a stern expression crept over his face. He moved off stealthily, soundlessly, skirting the house but keeping to the

shadows, and grateful for that daylight reconnaissance he had made time to carry out before leaving for the "Crown." . . .

The silence was oppressive. Even the rodents of the night were still. Drummond moved swiftly. Some protective instinct made him pause, motionless, as abruptly as he had started moving. He listened intently.

The sharp, protesting squawk of a bird seemed to shatter the silence, was magnified by the preceding—and immediately subsequent—all pervading quiet.

Hugh Drummond stood stock-still, straining to hear some tell-tale sound. That bird had proclaimed something: was it the presence of someone else in the grounds, as stealthy as himself?

But nothing further happened. With redoubled care, Drummond started to move again. . . .

19: IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND WINDOW-CRASHES

IRMA PETERSON surveyed her expectant audience, as she walked into the big room and went towards the chair prepared for her. A pretty revolting lot, she was bound to confess. Not that they looked unwashed: in certain cases, very far from it, for the skin seemed to shine palely as if it had been polished. One or two among them were of the normal, stolid type, but they were the exceptions. For the most part these men—and the few women—looked, somehow, sharp, as if you might well cut yourself, both physically and mentally, by contact.

Irma Peterson was accustomed to the less savoury

specimens of human nature. Not that she normally mingled with the scum : that was the job of her underlings. Still, more than most people, she could instantly recognise types in any clothing, and was able to control her reactions to her fellow beings. She showed no sign of the revulsion she experienced when faced with this particularly displeasing lot : indeed, as she took her seat, she showed no emotion whatsoever. She might have been what she appeared to be : a drab, unexciting, characterless woman of middle age.

She was introduced to the meeting by a rather fat, bald man who looked as if he were allergic to fresh air. He spoke softly, but his voice was penetrating. He was listened to with respect. To do him justice, he was obviously possessed of personality, and when he started to speak, the nervous fidgeting and subdued coughing ceased as if by magic. He did not speak for long. Mrs. Benton, he explained, had been sent to them by high authority to tell them of the new policy which it was their duty to carry out. Mrs. Benton was the directing voice ; they were the willing tools. It was upon their efforts, in the tasks about to be explained to them, that the progress of their cause would depend

He made way for Mrs. Benton. She rose, smiled, quietly said she was glad and proud to be the mouth-piece on such a vital occasion, and then paused. She drew herself up slightly, and the effect was instantaneous : she seemed to assume an unexpected power, a personal authority which made the members of her audience lean forward expectantly, determined to miss no word.

"All over the world," said Irma Peterson, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "we are advancing the cause. All over the world, progress is being made. But unfortunately prosperity is our worst enemy : wherever men and women find the necessities of life not too difficult to obtain, they fall into a self-satisfied political

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lethargy which is inexcusable. . . . We must combat this lethargy : I have come to tell you that we must create dissatisfaction, and the easiest way is to create real want."

Her audience stirred a trifle uneasily : they were tense.

"Yes," said Mrs. Benton. "We must create real, suffering want. . . ."

* * * * *

I want badly to get a peep into that room, said Hugh Drummond to himself. Better still, perhaps, would be to be able to hear what's going on inside. But there isn't a chink of light from any of the windows : that butler certainly curtains well. No good going the round again : no peep hole of any sort. . . .

He was crouched by the wall of the house, well in the shadows, but he could have wished for a less splendid moon. The trip across the lawn, to the walls of the house from the shelter of the shrubbery, had not been pleasant. But it had been necessary to take the risk.

Had the trip really been necessary ? asked Drummond of himself. Now that he was actually within a few feet of those mysterious people inside the room, he did not seem to be any nearer a solution of their business or their identities. . . .

Hugh Drummond, as silently as a huge cat, started to prowl again. There must be some way. . . .

* * * * *

"It is the only way," said Mrs. Benton with finality. So far, she was pleased with herself : things were going well. What arrant rot it was to think that the British were more loyal to their traditions and their history

than other countries ! Here, in this room, were more than twenty men and women, all ready to sell their countrymen into bondage for . . . what ? Some were fanatics, no doubt, such as are to be found anywhere, people with the warped minds of a burning solitary thought, and no more room in their small brains for even a spark of compromise. But very few. As she looked round that room, she saw avarice everywhere. Not avarice for money : that was a point, of course, and for many an important point. But it was power for which they lusted : the sort of power, thought Irma Peterson, that ordered execution and enjoyed to watch it. The sort of power of which tyrants boasted. And they were terrifyingly small brains to be entrusted with such power. . . .

Yet Irma Peterson found no moral difficulty in her task of inflaming that lust. Why should she ? She smiled to herself as she reflected that this was not her country, that, in fact, she had no country. And she almost laughed as the amusing thought occurred to her that Captain Bulldog Drummond was just of the type to suffer most, at the hands of the poor dupes within that room, in their brief moment of wild, blood-stained orgy before their foreign masters turned the final screw . . . She, on the other hand, would be lavishly spending her profits in some capitalistic country of sun and plenty. . . .

"Our aim," said Mrs. Benton, "is nothing less than a world union of soviets, controlled, of course, from our headquarters. We must push that ideal, for all we are worth, until it is a fact. Nothing must be allowed to interfere, nothing, no one . . . opposition must be swept away, annihilated . . . any means is justified in achieving this great end. . . ."

She paused again. What consummate fools . . . she had given them the clue, and they failed to grasp it ! "Controlled, of course, from headquarters !" Where

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was their selfish ambition leading them? To ruthless extermination in their turn, when their uses were over, and their demands for reward became inconvenient. To slavery, with those they wanted to make slaves. . . .

"You have done well. You are men and women in the key positions of many great unions. You represent electors under many banners. Not all of you can yet come out into the open. But the intensification of the fight must come now.

"We have had a set-back in France. . . ."

* * * * *

The french windows ! Hugh Drummond wondered if there might be hope there : such windows were not always sound proof. A vision came to his mind of the steel frames in his own house in the country, warped a little at the top, and frequently difficult properly to shut. And he had noticed such steel-framed french windows just round the corner of the house.

The trouble was that the moon shone with regrettable enthusiasm on that wall. He glanced up at the sky : no sign of a helpful cloud ! Bother ! said Drummond to himself. It's a nasty risk : still, I'm doing no good where I am.

He was fairly certain that he alone was prowling the grounds. It was undeniably some little time since he had been so occupied, but in the old days Hugh Drummond—with his remarkable eyesight and wonderful hearing—could tell if there were a living thing anywhere within yards of him. It was not only his eyesight and his hearing : it was also a gift highly developed by training as all gifts must be, of analysing and recognising sounds and signs. Hugh Drummond had made the complete tour of the cover round that house when he had first set out that night : it had been a necessary preliminary to the rapid crossing of the moonlit lawn.

The only possibility of others on the prowl lay in the chance that a patrol, as skilful as himself, was rounding the house in the same direction as he was himself moving, and at the identical speed. Not a very likely chance. . . .

Drummond hesitated only for a few seconds more. He did so not to assess the risk of discovery—his mind was already made up about that—but to remind himself of the consequences, should his presence be revealed. Up to now, his would be the advantage of surprise when the showdown came. His presence in England and not in Switzerland, the fact that he was so hot on the trail, simply must not become known to Irma. That had to be weighed against all risks taken. But here he was doing nothing, outside when he wanted to be inside, or at least in a position to learn the meaning of that collecting together of mysterious people within the house. . . .

Hugh Drummond slipped quietly round the corner of the house, keeping as close to the wall as possible. As he left the shadows, the light of the moon seemed to him like the floodlit glare of arc lamps. He experienced an odd sensation that he was making an entrance on to a stage. . . .

* * * * *

“We must not be in any way disturbed about recent events in France,” continued Mrs. Benton. “Approximately in the words of one of our greatest enemies, we may have lost a battle, but we have not lost the war. For make no mistake about it, we are just as much at war to-day—and we must use violence of war as and when necessary—as we were when fighting the hordes of Fascism. Now we are fighting the pale undermining reasonableness of Socialist left-wing parties throughout the world, just as much, if not more, than the Fascist, capitalist right. We must impose our ideology on the fools who do not know what is good for them.”

Irma Peterson paused momentarily, and very nearly laughed. So nearly had she slipped, and said "good for *us*." What great difference would it have made, she asked herself, had she actually made that slip? Shocked one or two, perhaps : scarcely been noticed, no doubt, so according to their inner thoughts was the implication, by the many. . . .

Very slowly, very impressively, she went on :

"I repeat, we must use the violence of our war as and when it is necessary. We have reached the time for a new policy. It is of this new policy, of this violence, that I have been sent to you to speak. . . ."

* * * * *

No good being violent with that blasted door ! It fitted a darned sight too well. With a grin to himself, Hugh Drummond felt a trifle jealous of the fitting : it would have saved a draught in his own home ! He dared not apply any strength, for noise was bound to result, and noise he must avoid at all costs.

But Drummond was beginning to get very anxious. That meeting, or whatever it was, going on inside the house, could not go on for ever. A large part of it must already be completed. And here he was, still as far as ever from having even an inkling about the nature of the meeting. It was mischievous, of course, mischievous in the worst and most dangerous sense : nothing connected with Irma Peterson could be anything but that. And for that very reason, he must find out what it was all about. Hugh Drummond had a nasty feeling that this instalment of the running fights between himself and Irma might prove to be the most important of all. She had never before gone to so much trouble, taken quite such elaborate precautions, to ensure that she would enjoy a clear field. Thank heaven she had over-elaborated just that fraction which had been

sufficient to arouse his suspicions. Thank God he was always suspicious, always would remain so, as long as Irma Peterson disgraced the world with her presence. . . .

But these thoughts, flash though they did through his mind, were getting him no nearer the solution of his immediate problem. There must be some solution . . . it was absurd to suppose that he was stumped at last. Fortune, up to now, had been on his side : surely the fickle jade was not going to desert him just at this important moment? Not if he did something about it, Hugh Drummond told himself. He had often been accused of luck in the past : but it was firmly his belief that luck is always on the side of those who go after its patronage by unlimited exertions on their own account. Still, what more could he do? Get out of the moonlight, anyway, and not just wait for something to turn up. Another tour of the house, perhaps, to see if there were any possibility his eagerness had overlooked. He shivered : the wind was getting up.

Drummond regained the shadows of the front side of the house. Automatically, he moved both swiftly and silently. But there was less reason for silence now : the leaves in the beech hedges were murmuring loudly, the tall trees were bending and groaning with the effort. The night, from having been unnaturally calm, was breathing stertorously. And this wind was making things chilly, Drummond told himself, as he turned up the collar of his jacket.

His ankle touched something which resisted his progress. He stood stock-still at once, looking down to see the cause. And as he realised what it was, a sudden exciting idea began to take shape in his quick brain.

This small May tree has to be supported, said Hugh Drummond to himself, against the storms of the year. It's been a thing of beauty to somebody : at some time or other it has been sufficiently prized to be wired in

order that it shouldn't fall : one of those wires has just caught my ankle. But lately the gardener has rather lost interest : the poor thing is leaning drunkenly towards the house. At just about the height, too, of that tempting window. . . .

If that wire weren't there, and Drummond grinned to himself in the darkness, at the first wind that tree would fall against the window. The glass might break : I could make sure that it did, now, couldn't I ? And I could be under cover in that clump of bushes by the time that anyone within that room could find out what had happened. And when they did come out, even if they were suspicious at first, the natural cause, now that there's a gusty wind, would be obvious and soothing. Provided the wire is not cut, and looks as if it had given way through sheer rusty exhaustion.

Drummond bent down and examined the supporting wire. It had been dragged from position by a series of storms, and never replaced : it looked as if it had been untouched for years, and the unpruned condition of the small tree confirmed this impression. The end of the wire was edged into the ground, but as the tree leant drunkenly, so had the wire been kept taut with the process of leaning. . . . By exerting pressure on the tree, Drummond found that he could loosen the wire : and when this was achieved, he pulled the wedge from the ground without too much difficulty.

But now would the tree be as pliable ? He tested it carefully, and found that it was less loose than he could have desired. But it gave way to his muscular attention : no slender tree of that size stood a chance against the applied strength of the huge Drummond. With a satisfactory rising of the soft ground all round, the roots gave up their hold. . . .

In a few seconds Hugh Drummond stood with the narrow trunk gripped in his great hands, poised for the final effort. Then a grand heave sent the branches

crashing against the window, shattering the glass. And before the sound died away, Drummond had reached the comforting protection of that nearby clump of bushes. In the co-ordination of brain, muscle and speed of movement, it was an impressive demonstration. . . .

* * * * *

Mrs. Benton glanced round her fascinated audience. "To-morrow," she told them, "I shall start a brief tour of demonstration. . . ."

But she got no further: she was interrupted by the totally unexpected sound of breaking glass, and the heavy velvet curtains on her left abruptly billowed inwards.

The violent interruption would have startled in any case: but coming on top of what she had just been saying, it frightened. No one actually said a word, but those nearest the window cowered away as if afraid of the next move, and all were struck with a momentary paralysis of terror. For some seconds, not a move, not a sound, was made in that stricken room. . . .

Then the rather fat, bald man recovered himself, and led the rest. He leapt from his chair, ran down the room towards the curtains, and with a dramatic gesture pulled them apart. An exclamation of astonishment escaped him as he found himself confronted by the branches of a tree. A gust of wind seized one of the curtains, and blew it from the grasp of one of his podgy fingers into the faces of those who were now clustering around him. At almost the same moment, a voice spoke from outside.

"It's all right, sir."

Irma Peterson had walked down the room, and joined the little group. She saw that it was the butler who had spoken, from the outside of the house. She was glad to see that he had been so alert: a good man,

evidently. It must have needed agility out of the ordinary for him to reach that spot so quickly, from the post in the porch which had been allotted him. It was reassuring, also, to see that he was slipping a vicious looking automatic back into his pocket.

"All right?" demanded the bald man petulantly. "What d'you mean, all right? It looks all wrong!"

"I mean that it was an accident, sir. The support holding this ornamental tree gave way, and the wind made it fall against the window. . . ."

"How do you know that?"

"You can see it out here, sir. The supporting wire has been dragged from position. It has been neglected of late, that's obvious."

"Oh." The bald man scratched his head. "Well, it's no ornament now. Take it away."

"Very good, sir."

But to remove the tree was beyond the physical power of the butler unaided. He was forced to obtain assistance from the house, and the bald man pushed from inside with a will. At last, the offending tree was laid flat on the ground, and the butler and his satellites withdrew. As they disappeared into the house, a shadow flitted noiselessly from an adjacent clump of bushes, and merged itself with the branches of the fallen tree below the window. . . .

The bald man spoke very softly to Mrs. Benton.

"Some of them are superstitious," he murmured. "Better make use of that fact . . . broken glass . . . violence. . . ."

Mrs. Benton nodded.

"It's . . . safe to go on?"

He smiled.

"Oh, yes! No one has any idea that we are gathered here, and the butler is an admirable guard. So are his men."

She still looked a trifle doubtful.

"There is no possibility of this being other than an accident?"

He looked at her curiously.

"Surely you're not nervous!" he whispered. "If the butler is satisfied, I am. He's of the type that enjoys a fight: if he so much as scents one in the offing, he'd be all out after it. He was obviously disappointed at the natural explanation which was so evident. . . ."

"Very well."

Mrs. Benton turned back to her audience. If she had shown any traces of apprehension only a moment before, she showed none now.

"It is perhaps fortunate, in view of the draught in the room, that I had almost finished." She waited until the laughter, nervously more than the poor jest deserved, had abated. "The final details will be given to you all, in this room, in two days from now, meeting at the same time. Then . . . *action*. In the meantime, I shall visit certain of you, who have been allotted the more specialised tasks of the scheme, during the next two days, and carry out small demonstrations."

She drew herself up again, as she had when she had first started to address her audience. Once again they responded to that action, as if it were symbolic. Once again the drab Mrs. Benton seemed to assume an unexpected power, and her listeners lost their preoccupation with the smashed window, and leant forward expectantly.

"I have been talking of violence . . . violence to come. We shall not regret it: the glorious end justifies any means. And as I was talking, nature itself has desired to show us its sympathy. . . ."

She paused, and glanced towards the swaying curtains covering the shattered window. It was beautifully, theatrically done. Her delighted audience burst into vociferous applause.

And under cover of that noise, nature . . . in the person of Captain Hugh Drummond . . . shook with laughter. Then he took up a more suitable position from which to observe the visitors as they would take their leave from the house, to enter their cars. . . .

20: IN WHICH CYNTHIA EVERSLED IS THE WINNER

MR. PARKER, of the "Crown," was delighted to oblige with breakfast, in spite of the very early hour. The addition of an attractive young lady to the party caused him no visible surprise. No doubt he recollected vividly, perhaps with a touch of nostalgia, other occasions when the Captain had made astonishing demands, and produced unexpected guests. It has been the rule then to ask no questions, and he reverted easily into the habit. The Captain could do no wrong, no matter what appearances might indicate. The Captain's lightest word was law, his faintest wish—once suggested—must be fulfilled. Breakfast, and a remarkably satisfying breakfast which thrilled the hungry eye of Algy Longworth, was produced in just the time it took to rob the hens.

But Longworth was given little time to satiate the inner man. Hugh Drummond, to use Longworth's own pained expression, chivvied him unmercifully towards indigestion. Then he was packed off, in his car, to take up position. His instructions were clear : where Irma went, he was to follow. What she did, he must know, and she must not know he knew it. Whom she saw, he must note, and identify if possible. But Drummond laid stress on his remaining unidentified himself. If it became a choice between being recognised and

recognising someone, then he must remain unrecognised. Report to the "Crown" at eight that night. Longworth went on his mission, full of enthusiasm, and showing it by a nice flow of grumbles . . . and a rumble or two from the undigested eggs. . . .

Peter Darrell's orders came next. Had he any old cricket balls hidden away somewhere? Well, yes . . . there were the two he kept handy for the nets, and the one with which he had taken the first four Yorkshire wickets in the Lords' match last summer. . . . Could he still guarantee to throw the wicket down at fifteen yards? Good lord, no! It was several seasons since he had played regularly for Middlesex. Still, he'd be able to do it three times out of six? Possibly, with luck. Well, he might need that luck, and the balls. Would he kindly collect them. How long would that take? Oh, three-quarters of an hour after he reached London.

Splendid. He would then have time to call on this fellow—Drummond was scribbling on a card. He handed it to Darrell. Who on earth was this chap? The news editor of a famous evening paper. Darrell was to give this lad the card, and on it was written a description. Oh, the fat bald-headed fellow of last night! Exactly. Who was he? News editors knew everything, and they also had available a gallery of photographs. Identification and all known particulars, please! And promise him he'll be let in on the ground floor when something can be said—he'll play then. . . .

And if there was any time over it was not to be spent in saturating at the club. Inspector McIver of Scotland Yard was to be routed out from his office. He was not to be tackled within the precincts—the Inspector was too apt to suffer from conscience, and consider any conversation in the holy of holies as official. But there was a good local pub at the corner, well supplied with the wherewithal for obliterating conscience.

Darrell was to entice McIver thither, fill him up, and then give him this message : *The official view is wrong, but intensely useful for the moment. I will not overplay my hand, and have got to be trusted, for heavy-handed official interference now would let the cat out of the bag. Unless I'm desperately mistaken, this is the biggest thing yet. So be ready to swoop at once on the word from me.*

How'll he take it? As he always does, God bless him ! Horribly curious, but completely trusting. And remember, Peter, not another word ; no clue about anything at all. In fact, shake him the moment you give the message, so as to avoid that cunning cross-examination which old Mac is so darned clever at merging into innocent conversation.

Then report back here at eight. Any questions? Good, but you'd better repeat that message back. No, not blundering official interference ; he won't like that. Heavy-handed means just the same thing, and is sufficiently polite . . . for Mac to swallow, anyway. It's not actually rude. . . .

That's it. Once more for luck . . . splendid. Away with you, then, as soon as you've dealt with that last piece of toast . . . it's a couple of miles, on your flat feet, to the station. So long, Peter . . . good luck ! And don't forget those cricket balls. . . .

"It's a bit late in the year for cricket . . . ?" suggested Cynthia as soon as they were alone.

Hugh Drummond laughed gaily.

"And early in the day for explanations !"

He smiled to her. He offered her a cigarette, took one himself and lighted both.

"I don't quite know what to do with you," he told her seriously.

"Anything useful."

"You're a grand girl." Hugh Drummond spoke quietly. "Grand girls, especially good-looking grand girls, are scarce."

"Thanks!" she smiled. "What's that got to do with it?"

He paused for a moment, deep in thought. She watched him, a smile playing about her eyes, knowing very well what was in his mind, and the difficulty he was in to phrase his thoughts so that they would not offend. But at the same time as the smile, a hint of obstinacy also showed in those round eyes. . . .

He looked up suddenly.

"I think I'd better be quite frank."

"I think you'd better be. . . ."

"As a matter of fact, I've got to." He leant forward, and lowered his voice. "You've been useful, Cynthia, couldn't have been more. But . . . now's the time when you step out."

"Really?"

Hugh Drummond glanced at her quickly, caught the mocking expression on her face.

"Yes, really."

"Why?"

"You're devastatingly direct, aren't you?"

She did not answer him, but waited. Uncomfortably, Hugh Drummond continued.

"This is why. Things happened last night which have convinced me—as you already know—that this is a big show. More than that, it looks like being a rough show. Quite a lot of people may get hurt . . . badly."

"Go on. . . ."

"Now please don't be difficult, dear. I know all about the part women played in the war: they were terrific."

"And they had their rough-houses."

"All right: they did. But not quite of the same sort. . . ."

"Exactly of the same sort on gun sights. No difference that I could see in raids."

"I'll grant you that."

"That's handsome of you !"

"Cynthia !" A gentle, persuading note crept into Hugh Drummond's voice. "Help me, don't hinder ! Women, in certain circumstances, are every bit as good in dangerous actions as men. But they have two vital drawbacks : the first that they haven't been trained for the job, and the second their effect on their male comrades. . . ."

She looked at him coldly.

"What are you getting at now ?"

"Just this. Supposing Algy or Peter got hit : I'd do my best, of course, but if I was the only one left with vital information, I'd leave him . . . substitute yourself for the male, and I couldn't do it : all my upbringing, my instinct, would revolt. The same goes for Algy and Peter. I'm sorry, but you'd make us weak, and I don't think there's going to be room for any weakness."

He looked at her : she was watching him steadily, giving no hint of what was in her mind.

"And there's another thing," he went on quickly. "You're not one of the team, Cynthia. I don't mean that you haven't acted as a sort of voluntary honorary member, and been an asset. You have. But up to now it's been the skirmishing : from now on it's the battle. Peter, Algy and I are old comrades, who know what the others will do in emergency : it's a valuable sixth sense . . . when we're alone. But it doesn't mix well with an outsider, because the whole machine becomes doubtful about the unknown cog. No matter what your attributes, you make for weakness, regardless of your sex. . . ."

He paused.

"Have you convinced yourself ?" she asked.

"What ?"

"You're talking just as much to convince yourself, as to persuade me."

"I'm not."

"Don't lie : it doesn't suit you."

Hugh Drummond laughed shortly.

"Nobody's ever called me a liar before . . ."

" . . . and got away with it ? " she cut in. " Well, the record's broken, unless you propose to put me across your knee. . . . "

" I'd like to. "

She laughed.

" Go ahead ! But I warn you, I don't spank easily ! "

They stared at each other in silence : but the awkward moment was interrupted by the abrupt appearance of mine host.

" Your call to Switzerland, Captain ! "

Hugh Drummond hurried out.

" More coffee, miss ? "

She smiled to him.

" I'd love some ! A night in the country makes one awfully hungry, doesn't it ? "

Mr. Parker liked this blonde : no airs about her, she was friendly as well as restful to his experienced eye.

" Have another egg ? "

" Gracious, no ! I've already had about three months' ration ! "

" My hens haven't heard of rationing, " he assured her. " Certain ? "

" Sure ! Just coffee. . . . "

" Right-you-are, miss. "

When Hugh Drummond returned, she was enjoying a steaming cup, and she poured one out for him.

" Phyllis in form ? "

" In great heart, the darling. But old Ted's getting pretty fed-up with being bed-ridden. "

She laughed.

" I suppose he's very like you . . . ? "

" In shape, yes. But he's believed to be quite good-looking. "

She looked up quickly.

"Fishing?"

"Good lord, no!"

Cynthia Evershed smiled brightly.

"Hugh, I like your face. And I like you: I think Phyllis is very lucky. . . ."

"Here, I say!"

"No, let me go on. I don't flirt with married men. But I want to make things as easy for you as I can. You see, you can't shake me off. You've already tried, and failed. If you just dismiss me, I'll bob up again, probably at a most awkward time. But if you'll let me stay, I'll do anything I'm told, no matter how menial. Got that into your head?"

"Well, Cynthia, yes . . . but I . . ."

"Shut up, I haven't finished yet. You've been trying to tell me that there's danger ahead . . . well, I guessed that without being told. I've read a bit about you, you know, and although I don't suppose the papers know the half of it, they've published enough to give an idea of this Irma Peterson and her methods. So when you're up against her, anything may happen. Right so far?"

"Perfectly correct."

"Very well, then. I've had the luck of the century, falling into this thing. Have you the heart to throw me out now, when my appetite's been whetted . . . but not satisfied?"

Hugh Drummond suddenly laughed.

"If you put it that way. . . ."

"But I do put it that way."

"Then, Cynthia my dear, you win!"

Her only comment was typical.

"I was going to offer you another lump of sugar, but you don't need it now! You're sweet. What do I report about at eight to-night?"

21: IN WHICH A PARTY
IS PLANNED

MINE host had a nice wood fire burning in the private sitting-room that evening. Not that it was really cold enough, but he contended that it made the room more cosy. He had drawn two great beakers of beer, and these were on the table with the accompanying tankards. Packets of cigarettes were ostentatiously on the mantelpiece, and four boxes of matches. In fact, mine host had done his best to ensure that his late company commander would lack for nothing, and would not have to interrupt whatever he wanted the privacy for, by having to send for supplies. The sergeant-major was responsible for ammunition: he was making sure that the company was well provided. . . .

Algy Longworth turned up first, and viewed the scene with obvious approbation. He sank wearily into a chair, and revived himself with beer. Peter Darrell was not long after him, and was equally pleased with what he saw. On the stroke of eight, Hugh Drummond and Cynthia appeared together.

As soon as they were all comfortably settled round the fire, cigarettes going and with tankards within reach, Hugh Drummond turned to Darrell.

"You first, Peter."

"London," began Darrell quietly, "is still in the same place: the train didn't lose its way once, but it paused and puffed an awful lot getting there. I got the balls."

"The what?" asked Longworth, surprised.

"No questions, Algy."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I then visited your journalist friend, Hugh. Nice bloke."

"He is."

"A pretty taste in bitter. But useful, definitely useful. We found the chap in his rogues' gallery almost at once."

"Who is he?"

"Trades Union johnny. Pretty big, but keeps in the background. Not awfully popular with his colleagues, but too darned efficient to replace. Communist tendencies, suspected convinced Communist. Executive type. Here's the name and a little dossier I compiled."

Darrell handed Drummond a slip of paper. Hugh Drummond studied it carefully for a few minutes: then he consigned the paper to the fire, and watched it burn to ashes.

"Was he curious?" he asked.

"The newspaper bloke? Very. But decent about it. I told him what you'd said. That when there was a story, if ever there was one, you guaranteed he'd have the low-down. That seemed to satisfy him."

"Good. And then . . .?"

"I wangled McIver out of his lair. Once out, he suffered himself to be led to the pub with alacrity. Then, when he'd had two halves, I gave him the message, which gave him hiccups. But he was decent about it too. He gave me a message to take back to you, Hugh."

"Yes?"

"I was to tell you he's holding you to your promise. *You must not overplay your hand, under any temptation.* It was quite obvious what he had in mind: the reappearance of Irma, of course. I was to remind you that • *amateur interference is no longer tolerated.* And then he added rather a nice thing: he said *even by the amateur champion.* So that's what he thinks of you."

"Bless the dear boy!" said Longworth.

"Anything else?"

"No," said Darrell. "I took your advice, and left him at once. He was disappointed: I think he was getting nicely set for a spot of light-hearted conversation containing some buried leading questions. I just excused myself, slipped past the gents and out by the back way. The joke is that I forgot to pay for the round before I left."

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"Send him a postal order. But not from anywhere near here! Thanks, Peter. Your turn, Algy . . .?"

Preparatory to reporting, Longworth took a deep draught from his tankard.

"I don't like that woman!" he announced firmly.

"The essence of good factual reporting," Drummond told him, "is to leave out personalities."

"Nevertheless, I don't. She makes one think too quick, and it hurts. Never make your menfolk think at all, if you can help it, Cynthia."

"I'll try to remember."

"Good. I picked her up when she swept out of the gate. Same car, same chauffeur, no companion. We went for a nice drive for about ten miles, and then they stopped near a large farm. I was able to park off the road. A wart materialised from a small wood. . . ."

"A wart?" asked the girl, with a puzzled frown.

"He means a chap he didn't approve of," explained Darrell.

Algy Longworth looked at the girl with a pained expression on his face.

"What is this?" he demanded. "Heckling?"

"Go on, Algy. . . ."

"Aye, aye, Captain! The wart and the woman disappeared into the wood. But not from Algy. Summoning to his aid the fragments of scout-craft which he could remember from his patrol leader days, he followed, observing like anything, but unobserved himself.

The hideous pair reached a field, in which three of the largest ricks I have ever seen were clustered. Not sure, but I think it was unthreshed wheat. It isn't any more."

Hugh Drummond sat up suddenly.

"Why not?"

"Irma took a handkerchief from her bag. She did something to it, then the wart took it—rather gingerly I thought—and shoved it into the nearest rick. They both retired at speed back into the wood, but not so far that they couldn't see the ricks." He paused for a moment thoughtfully: when he went on, he spoke slowly. "I've never seen anything like it, Hugh, although I was only allowed to see the start . . . first of all thick smoke, and then . . . pouf! . . . flames everywhere! Those ricks hadn't a chance. It was the most damnable piece of arson: think how many bread units went up in smoke! And so efficient: the stuff must be frightfully powerful, and it spread twice as fast as I would have thought possible. And, don't forget, all from something that looked like a handkerchief!"

"Well, as I've said, I was only allowed to see the start because the pretty pair retired to their car straight away, and I had to follow. She took the wart with her for a few miles, then dropped him. But she picked up a tyke a little farther on. . . ."

"Is tyke another nasty man?" asked Cynthia, breathlessly.

"Of course," answered Longworth. "What else could a tyke be?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Go on, Algy!"

"Aye, aye, sir. This tyke looked a trifle more unsavoury, if possible, than the wart. Anyway, he was given a similar demonstration to the wart, only they chose a granary this time. It was set slightly apart

from other farm buildings, a sort of barn. And the tyke knew a fool-proof covered approach.

"I didn't actually see Irma produce a handkerchief this time, but I saw the tyke disappear with something that looked rather like a handkerchief. Back he came in a hurry, with a relieved look on his face. And then the barn went up . . . just like that ! They'll have had a job to save the other buildings, and any cattle that there may have been in them . . . I heard an awful row going on, as we retired at speed as per before. . . .

"Honestly, Hugh, I don't know how I didn't step in there and then. I was feeling furious. Your final order saved me, I think : when you said that above all I mustn't disclose my presence. If you hadn't said that, I'd have been in among her, getting a bit of those cows back for them, the poor beasts ! I like roast beef, but not on the prawn or shrimp principle."

Hugh Drummond did not reply : his thoughts were far away in the Customs shed at Northolt. When Longworth had first mentioned handkerchiefs in connection with Irma Peterson, something had stirred in his brain. And now, like a flash, he remembered what it was. In looking through her luggage he had been struck by the number of handkerchiefs she apparently considered necessary : handkerchiefs of all sizes, enough for ten imperial colds in the head ! It seemed horribly clear now that they were by no means intended, or prepared, for such an innocent purpose, and he suddenly wondered if his professional colleagues would have noticed anything odd about them, had they been examining those particular bags. . . .

"It seems so odd," complained Longworth. "It was infuriating, but so petty ! Not at all big enough a roguery for our pal Irma !"

"Unless," Drummond told him quietly, "what you saw is repeated a thousandfold throughout the country

in one dreadful night. Think of the consequences then. . . .”

“Great Scot !” murmured Darrell. “And my Communist. . . .”

But Longworth did not hear him : he was already continuing his tale.

“The tyke was dropped in his turn, well away from the locality. And I’m not at all sure that in the dropping came the first suspicion in Irma’s mind that she was not alone. . . .”

“What happened ?” asked Drummond quickly.

“It’s all right,” Longworth assured him with a smile, “nothing disastrous. Nothing at all, really, only the blasted woman made me think quick. She had dropped the tyke round a corner, and I came into view with the process nearly completed. I had to slow down quite considerably, to let her pick up speed and her distance again. I can’t swear to it, but I believe she looked round. She couldn’t have recognised me, but she could—and did—take a suspicious view about my car. They began to try dodges in front—slow downs, speed ups, the usual thing. I knew then that I’d seen all I was going to see for the day . . . and, Hugh, we’ve got to count the car out for the future, although I did shake her off . . . it’s too dangerous to try again. I waited until she did a slow down, just on the outskirts of a small town. I put my foot down hard, pulling on goggles, turning my coat up, pulling my cap more down over the nose than ever. I fairly shot past. They accelerated after me, and I drew up and parked in the market square. Out of the corner of my eye I saw them idle past. I got out slowly, and strolled over to the local. I saw them go off happily, confident they had made a mistake.

“Personally, I wasn’t quite so confident about their confidence just yet. But I knew I’d be all right if they didn’t come back to establish my identity, and so I

took up a tactical position by the window. In ten minutes I was feeling better. In half an hour, with no sign of them, I resigned myself to a couple of pints and a spot of lunch. Sorry, Hugh."

"Not in the least, old bird. You did all you could do, and you got me my answer."

"I didn't know you'd asked a question?"

"I wanted to know what she was going to demonstrate."

"Oh!" Longworth frowned at the recollection.

"Well, you know now. . . ."

"Thanks to you." Hugh Drummond lighted another cigarette. "Well, Cynthia, it's up to us now."

"Yes," said Longworth, with interest. "What have you two been up to?"

"First of all," said Drummond, "I should tell you that Cynthia and I had a serious talk, after you boys went off on your errands this morning. I put the thing as straight to her as I could. I tried to put her off us. . . ."

"And I refused to be put off," cut in the girl quietly. "I hope you two are not going to object."

Both Darrell and Longworth glanced quickly at Hugh Drummond for guidance. The action was not lost on Cynthia Evershed: she smiled to herself. It was rather a wonderful thing, this implicit faith in their leader: and, knowing him now, she was not surprised. . . .

"She's our junior partner," said Hugh Drummond.

"With her eyes wide open?" asked Darrell.

"As wide as they can be opened," Cynthia told him.

"Good enough!" Longworth laughed to her. "You're a yes-girl from now on."

"Yes," said the girl.

"That little matter having been settled, I took her off to the house. The house that harbours Irma at the moment. It seemed important to know a little of its internal lay-out, and to fix the strength of the opposition."

"Hugh!" Darrell's voice was concerned. "You didn't show yourself? You're easy to describe, you know, and Irma . . ."

Drummond laughed gaily.

"Of course not. That was where Cynthia started in to be most useful. We took the lodge first. Cynthia had heard the house was to let . . . could they give her any information?"

"They could and did," said the girl. "I don't think they like the new arrivals at the house. The lodge is occupied by an old couple, who have obviously gone with the house for years. Sort of gardener-caretaker type, plus nice respectable wife. The owner lives in Wales, never comes near the place. The house is let furnished whenever possible. It was recently let to the present occupiers for three months only: they took possession two weeks ago. At least, the staff did. I said, that might suit me. About three months from now was just when I wanted a house. But I was afraid of its size: it would surely require a large staff to run the place properly?"

Algy Longworth nodded approvingly.

"Quick!" he praised. "Must have pained your brain to think as speedily as that!"

"She got the numbers straight away, of course." Hugh Drummond took up the tale. "The couple told her that the present people only had a butler, a chauffeur, and another chap—sort of male cook-housemaid. And they could manage on that—even had a large party the previous night! So then Cynthia said well, that might be possible. Could she see over the house?"

"Oh, well played!" murmured Darrell.

"They weren't very sure whether it would be convenient at that moment," went on Cynthia. "The lady was out in the car with the chauffeur, the cook man was in the village doing the shopping or something—they'd seen him pass on his bicycle a few minutes before.

But the butler was up at the house : I could always try. And they told me that it was a condition of the lease that prospective tenants must be shown round. Armed with this knowledge, off I set. And as I walked up the drive, I told Hugh the story to date : he was keeping pace with me in the avenue of trees. We agreed a little plan, with the necessary alternatives. . . .”

“ I say ! ” said Longworth. “ She’s even getting the lingo ! ”

“ That butler was beastly. I told him I knew about the clause in the lease, but he said it only applied by appointment. However, I forced myself into the hall, and I kept him arguing for nearly a quarter of an hour before I allowed him to turn me out. Hugh, who had slipped in by the back, had told me ten minutes would be long enough.”

“ It was,” said Drummond. “ And now I’ve fixed a ground-floor window so that I can get in for a proper recce to-night. The rest of the day Cynthia spent in collecting a useful little contrivance from her theatrical friends. I was rather busy telephoning, and making one or two small purchases. . . .”

He paused. They watched him closely as he helped himself to beer. They continued to watch him as he deliberately chose a cigarette, and lighted it.

“ I suppose,” ventured Darrell, “ it would be indiscreet to ask about the telephoning and the purchases ? ”

“ Most ! ” laughed Drummond. “ For the moment, anyway, Peter. And now, old cherubs, a little sleep . . . you may not get any to-morrow night. . . .”

“ And you ? ” asked Longworth.

“ There’s that recce I promised myself,” said Hugh Drummond lightly, “ but that’s a one-man job. Mine. For the rest of you, the beds that the invaluable Parker has so kindly provided. I’ll be using mine a little later on. Breakfast at nine, boys : we’ll be busy to-morrow, preparing for our party here, before they have theirs

up at the house. I have a feeling they're going to have more guests than they anticipate. . . ."

And with that they had to rest content.

22: IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND REMAINS CHEERFUL

IN contrast to the previous night, the moon was having a tough job to peer through the prevailing and heavy bank of cloud, when Hugh Drummond set off just before midnight. A few drops of rain threatened worse things to come, but Drummond welcomed the change. Now that the geography of the surroundings to the house was firmly imprinted on his mind, the darker it was, the better it suited him. Hugh Drummond was not troubled by an intensity of blackness which would have blinded most people : his ability to see when others found it next to impossible was an asset of great value on a night like this.

He borrowed the ever-willing Parker's bicycle : no point in taking any risk, so Longworth's little car had to be left in the shed where it was concealed. He left the bicycle just off the road in the ditch which ran by the lodge. It took him only a short time to reach the shrubbery by the garage.

This was his first call, and he was pleased to find the Packard evidently put away for the night. Noiselessly he ascended the stairway to the room above, and took a long look, from the window, at the house. There was no sign of light or life. Satisfied with that side of the house at least, Hugh Drummond descended the steps again, and left the garage, working his way round the end of the house in order to examine its northern aspect.

This also was in total darkness. Upstairs, two windows were open, but there was no light showing from either room. Drummond made a mental note of the approximate positions of those two rooms: they were obviously occupied by sleeping people whom it would be best to leave undisturbed.

He reached the window, near the back door, which he had fixed in such a manner that he could open it from outside. Now that the moment had come to commence the real reconnaissance, he hesitated not at all. One minute he was standing by the window, the next he was standing inside the room.

He paused for a moment, absolutely still, listening intently. For all the apparent quiet of the house, he could not be sure that a guard might not be prowling about the house, who might have to be outwitted. Drummond reminded himself, with a good deal of regret now that he had heard Algy Longworth's report, that this was a one-man reconnaissance patrol, and not a fighting patrol. If there were somebody on guard, that person would have to be avoided and not eliminated. It was essential that his presence in the house that night should never be suspected by Irma Peterson, or any of her gang.

Still, it was unlikely that there would be a guard. There was no point in one . . . so far. No one had anything against the drab, quiet Mrs. Benton . . . except himself, and she had no knowledge of it. No one was thought to guess at the purpose of that meeting he had window-crashed the previous night. And as for Irma Peterson herself, she would be sleeping restfully, secure in the belief that Captain Hugh Drummond was being slowly nursed back to health by his loving wife, in a luxurious hotel in Switzerland. Had she even suspected that he was in the same country, let alone county, he flattered himself that there would have been guards everywhere! But since she believed him

laid low abroad, there didn't seem to be any point in protection. . . . Still, one must be careful. . . .

He had brought a small torch with him, and this he used to guide himself to the door. He turned it off before opening the door, and passing through, in one movement. Noiselessly, he closed the door behind him. Once again he stood motionless, listening for the faintest sound which would give away the unwelcome presence of another. No sound came to his alert ears. He switched on the torch again : no sense in risking an accidental collision with a table or a chair, which might give him away. He moved swiftly across the hall, in which he found himself, and went through into the big room which had held the meeting of the night before.

There, Hugh Drummond busied himself for quite a while. The "little contrivance" which Cynthia had borrowed from her theatrical friends had to be fixed, and this took a little time. Then one of the purchases which he had made that afternoon, which he had brought with him bound round his body, had to be most carefully placed. He wished that he could have turned on the light, but he dared not risk doing so, and had to be content with the beam from his torch. It was nearly an hour later before he was satisfied. But even then he was not finished with the room. He took a great interest in the french windows, and made one or two adjustments to their construction. And he examined the window so recently broken by the regrettable failure of the wire to support the leaning May tree : this, he found, had been boarded up skilfully during the day. Hugh Drummond made no attempt to interfere with the repair.

It was only then that his interest in the room waned. Before returning to the hall, however, he let the beam from his torch wander slowly round the large room, pausing for a few seconds wherever there was a cluster

of furniture. Then, turning off the beam, he went quietly into the hall.

Just inside the door, he paused again, listening. Still no sound came to his ears. On went the torch again, but this time he remained motionless, letting the beam play round the hall as it had just done in the room he had left, stopping momentarily as before wherever there was furniture. Had Darrell or Longworth been able to see the expression on his face at that moment, they might have guessed what he was about, for there was a ferocious frown disfiguring his normally good-natured features. Hugh Drummond had always found memorising a painful business. . . .

He was done with it at last. He let the torch play on the stairs, as high as he dared. Then he switched it off. Hugh Drummond could not control a rising sense of excitement, for he well knew that the riskiest part of the whole night's undertaking was just in front of him.

Completely silently he moved across the hall, now in absolute darkness. He reached the stairs. He started to ascend, praying that no creak would give away his presence to a light sleeper. He was getting very near to Irma Peterson, and he knew of old that she had an uncanny power of sensing his proximity. This part of the night's programme would need every bit of all the skill he possessed: he told himself that all his previous experience might have been a long training for the next half-hour in his life. . . .

By the light of his torch he had welcomed the sight of what appeared to be a thick stair carpet. He was glad, now in the dark, to find that he had not been mistaken. Swiftly, silently, he reached the landing at the top of the stairs. He froze, every sense on the alert, listening with all his might. . . .

And heard nothing. The house seemed dead.

Shading the beam with his left hand, to make

absolutely certain that it was directed only on to the floor, Hugh Drummond switched on his torch. Very carefully, he took stock of his position. He was soon aware that the stairs continued to ascend to another storey. There were three doors on that landing : one opposite him, one to his left, one to his right. He switched off the torch.

For a few seconds Drummond considered the odds. Two to one on the door on the left, leading to a room above the large room downstairs, being the entrance to the best bedroom. Three to one against the door on the right. Any odds the small door opposite. And Irma Peterson had never been satisfied with anything but the best.

He turned to his left, reached the door, and stooping, listened with his ear to the keyhole. He could hear nothing. Still, he would soon know : another sense would tell him.

It had failed at the airport, of course. But she had been taking no chances then : she would wait until she had got Mrs. Benton safely established in the country. Once here, safe in this house, Irma Peterson would not be able to resist the perfume which she always used. And his nose was well trained for it, since Guerlain's *Vol de Nuit* was the only thing in common between his wife Phyllis, and the woman Peterson. . . .

His left hand was on the door handle, the unlit torch ready in his right. He pressed gently. He hoped to goodness that the hinges were well oiled, and would make no sound. Very slowly, with immense patience, he began to open the door. It seemed ages afterwards when he stood within the room. . . .

But the odds had been landed. A very well-remembered perfume gently assailed his nostrils. . . . Hugh Drummond grinned to himself in the darkness.

Then he got to work. It was an easy matter to place the exact position of the bed, but less easy to

pick up the cupboards, for they were modern in type, built into the wall. Before he moved, it was also essential to memorise the exact placing of all the furniture: even a slight noise from a collision would be fatal, at this stage. He must not hurry: there is nothing so noisy as haste. But he must not be too long either: every minute spent in that room, only a yard or two from the sleeping Irma, was an appalling risk. He could hear her breathing now, regular, dreamless. She wouldn't sleep so well to-morrow. . . .

Hugh Drummond examined the first cupboard: it proved useless to him, being fitted only for hanging clothes. The second proved more fruitful. He was forced to use the torch again, but he shaded it as much as he could with his hand. He found her handkerchiefs.

They looked ordinary enough. He took two, and slipped them into his pocket. Then he noticed a box, the lid half off. It seemed full of small scent bottles, of the sort used in the trade for samples. They were all labelled *Vol de Nuit*. Funny, said Hugh Drummond to himself. I wonder . . . Algy said that she did something to those handkerchiefs before she handed them over to the wart and tyke. . . . He took two of the little bottles, and put them away with the handkerchiefs. . . .

Hugh Drummond turned and stood for a moment looking at the bed. He could not make out her features, only the rough outline of her body as she lay in sleep. A mischievous desire tempted him strongly, to play some terrifying trick on her: but he put the thought out of his mind abruptly. He had no right to jeopardise the success of this adventure, too much depended on it. But . . . it certainly was a pity . . . he'd never have as good another chance! Firmly he looked away . . . and as he did so, his eye caught sight of one of her well-remembered suit-cases.

Swiftly, obeying some instinct, Hugh Drummond

moved to the case, knelt beside it, and opened it. As he was doing so, he smiled to himself at the recollection of the circumstances when last he had done exactly the same thing to the same case. . . . The torch showed him a mass of handkerchiefs. . . .

Where on earth had they been hidden, he asked himself. No matter . . . in among her underclothes, probably. These were the important ones, no doubt, although he was forced to confess that they felt and looked like those others he had just found. . . . Drummond took two, and slipped them with the others into his pocket.

For a few seconds he stood by the door, looking back towards the bed. What a shame not to be able to take advantage of this unique opportunity . . . a thought suddenly struck him. He really ought to have a quick glance into her handbag, if it were anywhere readily available . . . he let the beam of the torch rest on the dressing-table. . . .

He saw it lying there : quickly he moved to it, looked inside. The usual things. One of those little sample phials of perfume. Ah ! *And* a small gold-topped cut-glass bottle of scent. . . .

Hugh Drummond replaced the bag, and began to move back towards the door. In the bed, Irma Peterson sighed gently, and moved restlessly. Like a silent flash, Hugh Drummond reached the door, and stood half in, half out of the room. He stood quite still.

Drummond heard her move again, still the restless movement of a person dull with sleep. He waited. Then, so softly that he only just picked up the sound, he heard the soft rustle of someone, suspicious, moving a hand slowly but purposefully from beneath the sheets towards . . . perhaps a bedside lamp ?

Hugh Drummond moved more rapidly than he had done all night. He moved on to the landing, and closed the door soundlessly behind him. And as he

did so, he saw a streak of light appear between the door and the floor. . . .

Only just in time ! It had been a lamp-switch for which she had been reaching. . . .

Drummond slipped down the stairs, and round to the cover of a window curtain, with uncanny agility. Nothing happened for several age-long seconds. Then the hall was flooded in the bright light of the centre chandelier.

From his place of concealment, Hugh Drummond could see part of the hall, but not the stairway or the landing to which it led. He wondered if at that very moment, Irma Peterson, certainly with a gun in her hand which she was very capable of using with unpleasant accuracy, was descending those stairs bent on further investigation. She could not have seen him, he knew that : she could not have seen anything suspicious. But she was suspicious all the same : there could be no doubt of that.

Then, just as abruptly as they had gone on, the lights went out. He heard a door close on the landing above. . . .

Gone back to bed ? Hugh Drummond made no move, made no sound. He remained rigidly where he was, not stifling his breathing and thus asking for trouble when he was forced to gasp for breath, but breathing very softly indeed through his open mouth. Stock still. The minutes went by. . . .

Then at last he heard the sound he was waiting for. Upstairs, from the landing, came a little peal of laughter. The laughter of relief in which someone might indulge on relaxing from a short strained period. He heard that door upstairs open, and shut again less pointedly. He longed to laugh himself . . . it had been a testing time. . . .

Only then did Hugh Drummond move. But he moved swiftly now, for his job was not quite done, and

he was anxious to leave the house behind him. Everything had gone beautifully according to plan up to now, but he would be glad to get away : the last few minutes had proved most disturbing.

He went through the swing door, oak on the hall side, green baize on the other, which obviously led to the servants' quarters. He began his search for the switchboard of the house. It was not long before he found it, where he had expected near the butler's pantry. He found something else there : a half-finished bottle of gin. Hugh Drummond helped himself, raising the bottle first towards that bedroom upstairs.

Then, by the way he had come, he left the house, regained the security of the shrubberies, found the admirable Parker's bicycle, and—whistling cheerfully but unmelodiously—began to pedal towards the comfort of the "Crown."

That tuneless whistling woke the startled birds from their sleep, sent rabbits scurrying for their burrows, even cowed a marauding fox. Only Hugh Drummond remained unaffectedly cheerful.

And perhaps Irma Peterson, who after calling herself a fool, was inclined to be amused at her suspicions as she again fell off to sleep. . . .

23 : IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND SPEAKS HIS MIND

HUGH DRUMMOND approved completely of Parker's efforts to prepare for his party. The large room had been allotted, the one which the locals referred to as the village hall. The arrangements for refreshment were admirable. The place had been warmed—a fire had been burning all day—and a large Union Jack

decorated the far wall. Parker approved of the preparations as much as Drummond, and loyally refrained from asking any questions.

A little before the time set for the arrival of the guests, Hugh Drummond gathered his little party together near the fire. He had held an earlier briefing meeting: as usual, on such occasions, neither Darrell nor Longworth had questioned their instructions, and Cynthia took her cue from them. But there had been a rather regretful look on their faces then, and it was still apparent now. If Drummond had noticed it at the briefing meeting, he had given no sign: but now he relaxed a little. He turned to Darrell suddenly:

"You don't altogether approve?"

"Entirely, but I'm jealous."

"You'll be in on it. . . ."

"I know." Peter Darrell sighed. "But . . . in a sort of executive rôle. Like a staff johnny."

"Same feeling here," smiled Algy Longworth. "I feel like a Whitehall warrior, with tabs on."

"It's an armlet now!" Drummond reminded him. "And anyway, you're in the front line. . . ."

"Sort of!" complained Longworth. "But it's not the same thing as actually socking one of those blighters. Hugh . . . wouldn't it be possible to run this on our own . . . we've done it before . . .?"

"Yes," said Darrell eagerly. "I don't know whether you remember, but there was once a Black Gang . . .?"

"Chaps!" Hugh Drummond spoke reprovingly, but there was laughter in his eyes. "You know perfectly well we can't. In those days we were younger . . . and, according to modern standards, wrong. Those methods to-day would be described as Fascist. You mustn't match force with force, when both are outside the law. . . ."

"On the principle of a couple of wrongs not making a right?" asked Longworth, and added, surprised: "Good lord, did I say that?"

Darrell looked at him sombrely.

"I'm afraid so. . . ."

Cynthia Evershed began to giggle weakly : really, these men were astonishing, particularly in view of what had been prepared for the night. But Hugh Drummond's quiet voice silenced her.

"Far more important than all that, is the reaction of our guests to Irma's guests. It's their show : it mustn't be pinched from them. We're giving them a few golden minutes, which they'll be able to gloat over for the rest of their lives, *and retail to their kids* . . . that's the important thing. But don't get me too serious yet ! I'm sorry you boys are going to miss the only political speech I shall ever make . . . and you too, Cynthia ! . . . but it can't be helped." He looked at his watch. "Time you were off, Algy . . . and you with him, Cynthia. Everything clear ?"

"As clear as the beer."

"Right. Off you go."

"Aye, aye, Captain !"

"Peter, they'll be here any minute now. Any questions ?"

"No."

"Off you go too, then. Remember, all of you, the timing's the thing. Everything starts with the hoot of the old owl. . . ."

"Aye, aye, sir !"

Hugh Drummond found himself alone. He stared thoughtfully into the fire. He wondered if he had given away, to those two old and close friends, how much he shared their spoken desire to be right in on this thing ? They were going to be, of course, but in a directing rather than in a really combatant way. It was galling, but it was inevitable. He had given more serious, considered thought to this decision, than to any other he had been called upon to make. He knew he was right in sacrificing the fun to others. This was *their*

show : the canker was in *their* midst and could be cured only of their own volition if the cure were to be permanent. They must not have any credit stolen from them. . . .

He was interrupted in his thoughts by the first arrivals, and close on their heels came the whole party. There were about twenty of them : they varied greatly in appearance, but they all shared, whatever their age, the quiet eyes of the man who is experienced in responsibility. Most of them were young and active—he had asked for that—but there were some older men among them. Most of them, he was amused to note, were obviously wearing their Sunday best, but they were all well and quietly dressed. They looked at him questioningly as they entered, shook hands firmly but with plain reservation, as if to tell him that he looked all right, but they wanted a closer acquaintance before coming to a definite view. They thawed with each other as the beer went round, but he saw them glancing at him curiously. They were awkwardly, gloriously British. . . .

As soon as they were settled, Hugh Drummond spoke.

"All wearing rubber-soled shoes, as I asked?"

There was a chorus of assent.

"Good. Now I want to emphasise at once that what I'm going to propose is an invitation, and nothing else. You are free to refuse it or not, just as you like, and no hard feelings. First, however, I think we should know each other a little better. . . ."

He looked round the room : they were all attentive, watching him closely. Hugh Drummond realised this task he had set himself was going to be pretty hard : he shared with every man in that room the British horror of self-revelation. Still, it had to be done . . . he took a deep breath.

"I am very grateful to your Council for collecting you all, and sending you here to-night, I am to remind you that, officially, you simply aren't here : the reason

will be obvious later. You are all trades unionists, and represent a variety of trades. Politically, you may be of any shade, but I presume most of you vote labour ? ”

“ Not all,” said a voice.

“ Most is right,” said another.

“ Good enough.” Hugh Drummond smiled. “ You may be suspicious of me, because I look as if I came from a different class. I hate using that word, because it’s class prejudice—on both sides—that makes two sides. There can never be complete adult equality in this odd world of ours—equality of youthful opportunity is the only thing that matters. All good men want to provide that—the chance for all to rise to lead—and we’re all in the same British boat for better or for worse. At least, we always seem to be when we’re in trouble. And, maybe, we’re in a spot of trouble now. . . .

“ Personally, I suppose I can best be described as just right of left. Just now I hate party labels : they’re another dividing factor. That’s because of some politicians who basely try to use them that way, which, of course, is bastardising the whole idea. We’re all after the same thing—government of the people, for the people, by the people—although we may differ as to the right approach to the ideal. But as long as we can go on agreeing to differ in friendship, trying out one method after another at the will of the majority, we’re on the right track. And we’re free. . . .

“ Not so the Communists. They overthrew a tyranny, but they’ve established another. They have exchanged one set of privileged people for a different but no better set. They tolerate no individual, political or religious freedom. And, like all other totalitarian parties, their privileged few are reaching out to strangle the freedom of everyone outside their boundaries. It’s a funny thing, but no tyrants can keep their hands to themselves . . . never have been able to. . . .

“ We in Britain are bad subjects for their avarice.

Here, if a chap governs selfishly, he gets thrown out . . . a sobering thought for the careerists. So the Communist strategy with us has been cautious. . . . an attempt to gain control of your . . . and mine, mark you ! . . . trade unions by infiltrating their subsidised men into key positions, so that they could stir up trouble and make us weak. It is only in weak, tired, troubled areas that Communism can thrive. They have tried to make trades unionism political and not professional, in order to weaken, bankrupt and tire us into trouble. . . .

"You've seen through that, and your leaders are trying to guard against the danger. So Communism, desperate, must take desperate measures. . . ."

Hugh Drummond paused. He looked round him, at the attentive faces. He smiled to himself. These good men could surely not go wrong . . . what a joy it was to be justified in believing so implicitly in their judgment and, whatever way they might choose to vote, their basic goodwill.

"I can prove to you to-night that what I say is true. That is my invitation to you. Come and see, and listen, for yourselves. I can let you attend, unseen, unheard, the final meeting of those plotting against you. But after that, it's up to you."

One of the older men spoke up.

"If what you say is true, I'll believe there's a good Tory after all !"

There was a sudden laugh. But a younger man broke in.

"If what you say is true, just give me five minutes alone in among 'em !"

Hugh Drummond could have cheered.

"That's just what I've arranged to do !" he told them, that cheerful grin spreading on his good-natured face. "But five minutes only . . . they're criminals, robbers with violence, and after that they

belong to the police. Stand up, those who want to come. . . ."

Every man stood up. Hugh Drummond gave them their instructions. . . .

Outside, Peter Darrell and two men with press cameras joined them. Hugh Drummond led them off into the night.

Cynthia met them at the appointed place, close by the lodge. She nodded to Drummond: that was all the information that he needed. Silently, as quietly as they were able, the party entered the wood. Rather circuitously, so as to minimise the chances of discovery, Drummond led them to the shrubbery.

Then, one by one, he carefully placed them round a square, box-looking object with which Algy Longworth was tinkering. A cable disappeared from it in the darkness, running towards the house.

Very softly, Hugh Drummond gave his final explanation.

"I've fixed a microphone near the speaker in that room yonder. The speaker's an old acquaintance of mine, and none of them inside have any idea the mike is there. As a matter of fact, it's hidden in the standard lamp just by her chair." He looked at his watch. "Nearly time, Algy. All set?"

"All set."

There was a short pause. Then Drummond spoke again.

"Thirty seconds . . . twenty seconds . . . ten seconds . . . five, four, three, two, one, *now!*"

Algy Longworth twiddled a knob. Very softly, the breathless company heard a voice come from the box.

"*Well, gentlemen, no need to introduce Mrs. Benton again. I'll ask her to speak at once.*"

A sharp intake of breath by his ear from one of the elder men made Drummond smile to himself. One traitor, at least, was identified, not merely to the police, but to those who had called him friend. . . .

24: IN WHICH ALGY LONGWORTH CONTROLS THE TRAFFIC

THE even but authoritative tones of Irma Peterson's voice came to the group of horrified listeners in the shrubbery.

"In one week from to-day, strikes will break out everywhere. It is our aim to paralyse the country. All our agents have instructions to try for a general strike, and to stop at nothing to get this complete paralysis. These strikes will have to be unofficial, because of the cowardice of the union leaders, who are lackeys of the capitalists, but the workers must be inflamed to go so far that they commit themselves, and cannot retreat. At this point, you . . . all of you . . . step in. There is to be destruction everywhere, chiefly of food and of machinery in factories. . . . I have given you the means. It must be made difficult to eat, and difficult to start work again when the strikes peter out . . . if they do. Life is to be made much harder, so that the sufferers will turn to us for salvation. At the same time, all over that part of Europe which is still misguided, the same treatment will be meted out, so that all who disagree with us will be forced into submission by the chaos everywhere. . . . That is our glorious task. We can wait no longer, for our enemies to arm themselves mentally and materially with avaricious American aid. Less violent methods have been tried, and have failed for lack of time. There is no room, now in Europe and later throughout the world, for those who will not submit to our rule. . . ."

"I've had enough o' this!" said a gruff voice.
 "Let's get at 'em!"

There was an assenting growl from all round: it was music in Hugh Drummond's ears.

"Away you go, Algy!" he whispered. "Cynthia, wait for the hoot and then take 'em to the french

windows. . . . They'll open. And remember, photographs first, for identification later. Then let 'em loose, but you keep out. Ready, Peter ? ”

“ You bet I am ! ”

They dissolved into the night on their missions. Now that the great moment had arrived, a strange calm had descended on Hugh Drummond. It was up to them, now, the trustees who were to have their golden minutes. All he could do was to act as a sort of umpire, and keep the armed thugs well away . . . and he hoped that his plan for putting that into effect would succeed in full. . . .

Drummond and Darrell reached the reconnoitred point from which they could see the porch clearly. The outline of the lurking butler became visible in the moonlight, which was pale but sufficient. Peter Darrell had been right, then, two nights ago, in reporting that the porch was a sentry-box for the butler. So far so good : the other two couldn't be far away : they had come too quickly when required to move the May tree from the window. With any luck, Algy Longworth would get into the back premises unobserved. But he must give him time to reach the switchboard : this necessary waiting was a bit hard on the nerves, and he hated letting the warm enthusiasm of the small indignant army in the shrubbery have time to wane : don't be silly, it couldn't do that, they were too angry . . . bless 'em ! And Irma was no doubt still speaking, to infuriate them all the more. . . .

Now ? Better give him a moment or two longer, just to make absolutely sure. Drummond glanced at Peter Darrell by his side, and smiled as he saw him fingering one of his cricket balls. Wonderful how useful a proficiency at sport could be !

Now ? Hugh Drummond glanced at his watch again, saw that time was passing unconscionably slowly. It was the strain, of course, rather like waiting for zero

hour on past occasions. . . . Too many past occasions for one lifetime. Still, perhaps that night's activities might put off the next one for some time, even if it might be too much to hope that such occasions could be barred for ever, human nature being human nature. . . .

Now? Yes, now. Hugh Drummond threw back his head, and his powerful lungs emitted a hoot the like of which any owl would indeed have been proud to emulate. . . . It was piercing, carrying . . . but scarcely very realistic. . . .

At once the curtains darkened. A light, which had been shining from an upstairs window, vanished. A crack of illumination from the porch went out.

"Right, Peter. . . ."

Hugh Drummond's hoarse whisper sent Darrell into action, but Drummond did not watch him. His eyes were glued on the shadowy figure in the porch.

Peter Darrell let fly. He did so as coolly as he might have made a fast return to the wicket-keeper. The ball sped straight for the second-storey window selected, crashed through the glass. The noise was eminently satisfying. Long before it had died away, Darrell was ready with the second ball.

Drummond saw the figure of the butler disappear into the house. He laughed aloud.

"Well played, Peter. Keep 'em on the move. . . ."

But even as he spoke, Drummond himself was moving towards the house. He went as swiftly and as silently as was his wont. He reached the porch, slipped into the hall, and took up position just outside the door of the big room. Complete silence came from within the room: evidently no one had yet recovered from their shock. Drummond stood there in the pitch darkness, listening with satisfaction to sounds of confused shouting from upstairs. The butler and his satellites were plainly finding it difficult to establish contact with each other, and to trace the source of the crash from above. . . .

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

Another abrupt crash, away on the right this time, but still at the top of the house, made him grin to himself. Darrell was keeping them on the move. That was the second ball, smashing another window which would draw them and their guns to another point far from the real fun . . . how Drummond wished they might start shooting each other up in the confusion !

"Hugh !"

It was Darrell's voice from the porch.

"Yes ?"

"Oke. They've finished."

As Hugh Drummond emitted his second huge hoot, he realised that he need not have arranged for Darrell to give him the right moment. Pandemonium seemed abruptly to reign in the next room. He laughed happily to himself : it had been necessary to photograph those present, in case any escaped from the golden minutes, but they would none have been willing to sit for their portraits. Any attempt to photograph them with the lights up would have resulted in successful attempts to conceal their features. But, taken by flashlight when they were unsuspecting in the dark, this ruse would fail. . . .

His sharp ears detected the sound of the door beside him being wrenched open. Ah ! His moment : here she came. . . .

Hugh Drummond's great arms folded the soft figure of Irma Peterson.

"Got you at last, my beauty !"

He heard a gasp. And, the next moment, he marvelled at the lissom strength of this strange creature, as she struggled in his grasp. Strong as he was, she was proving a very difficult customer to hold. What the devil was Algy Longworth doing with those lights ? He should have put the main switch on again on the second hoot. . . . It seemed almost as if he had two women in his arms, or more : and slippery as an eel, too . . . blast Algy !

Abruptly, the struggle ceased. The figure in his grasp sagged suddenly : he had to hold her up. Fainted ? Unlike Irma, but possible. He hoped to heaven she hadn't been able to take poison . . . true, she had no future in the hands of the police of almost any country. But that again would be unlike her : she was nothing if not an optimist, she would never concede defeat until her heart stopped beating. . . . He took very careful hold of the drooping figure : this was probably a trick. Irma was full of tricks, as he knew only too well. He braced himself to retain his hold when the struggle was renewed . . . as it would be, he felt sure, at any unexpected moment. . . .

The lights went on. Hugh Drummond found himself staring at the inanimate form of Cynthia Evershed, hanging in his arms. . . .

The noise of battle from next door immediately drowned all other sounds. It was just what Hugh Drummond had been waiting to hear ; it would have exceeded all his happy expectations . . . if he had heard it. But he just stood stock still, staring at the white face and closed eyes of the girl. The shock, just for a moment, made him appear stupid, but his mind was working swiftly all the same. Irma must have been here. When I grabbed her, I spoke. If it had been Cynthia, she'd have told me. That means that Cynthia was like this when she got here. That means that Irma must have brought her. And done this to her . . . ye gods, but how ?

Never mind how. Irma knew I'd be waiting here, the hoot told her that. So Irma did in Cynthia in the dark and used her as a screen—that's clear. But I had hold of Irma, or there'd have been no struggle—that's clear too. Irma slipped out, leaving Cynthia—that's why I thought Irma was equal to two. In that case, where's Irma now ?

A sudden, dreadful recollection flashed through his

brain. It had been such a short time before that he had been discussing this very situation, theoretically, with the apparently lifeless girl in his arms. She had been full of life, then, full of life and beauty. And he had explained to her that if duty called, and a choice had to be made, succour to her, even if vital, must take second place to duty. Where was Irma? Not very far away, she couldn't be . . . every second wasted gave her a better chance of escape . . . duty was calling now. . . .

The sharp report of a pistol shot startled him.

"Winged him!" said Algy Longworth from the other side of the hall. His voice sounded full of satisfaction. "The butler johnny. He was taking a bee-line on you."

Hugh Drummond snapped out his words.

"Careful, Algy, there are two more."

"Good," said Longworth pleasantly.

"Take care of Cynthia."

"What!" Longworth became concerned for the first time. "Cynthia! I thought you'd got Irma!"

"So did I," said Drummond grimly. "If I don't come back with him, help Mac, and when this is cleared up, wait at the 'Crown.' Tell Peter."

Algy Longworth quickly but gently took the limp form from Drummond.

"Not so good!" he said. "And just as I was beginning to enjoy myself! I suppose you're after Irma?"

But Hugh Drummond had already gone. Irma Peterson was in a tougher spot than perhaps she realised: that was the great hope. In her concentration on speed she might blunder into the ring of Inspector McIver's police surrounding the house, not realising that they were there, at this very moment closing in. But old Mac must be warned that she was on the loose: no need to warn him also that she was dangerous. . . .

Hugh Drummond's mind was working at desperate

speed as he ran down the drive. Closing in, yes : on the second of his stentorian hoots, McIver would have given the signal to his men. Surely in her wild haste, Irma would not get through ? But there was a horrid doubt in the back of his brain. Irma Peterson had proved herself in the past to leave nothing to chance. She had never placed herself in any position whence she could not disappear in a markedly original manner. That was the only reason why she had retained her liberty up to now : the carefully thought-out line of retreat, always ready for any emergency. True, she had not this time thought herself in any danger : she had not suspected that anyone knew of her presence in Britain. That was quite clear from his experience during his reconnaissance of the previous night. So there was a good chance this time. . . . Well, was there ? Would the cautious habit of a lifetime, which had paid such handsome dividends, be overlooked through over-confidence ? It was possible, anyway . . . he must find Mac. . . .

Hugh Drummond ran straight into the Inspector, nearly upsetting him. But they wasted no words.

"Irma's gone !"

"Quite," said McIver, rubbing his knee which had met a particularly hard part of Drummond's burly shape at far too great a speed. With the other hand he inserted his whistle between his lips, and blew three sharp blasts. "That'll warn 'em. . . ."

"Of Irma ?"

"That someone's trying to break out. They've been specially told about Miss Peterson, of course."

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"Or Mrs. Benton."

"Or the Comtesse de Guy, or Uncle Tom Cobby, or any dam' person she may choose to make herself look like. If they saw a female tree, they'd arrest it."

"I hope they get the chance."

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

"So do I," said Inspector McIver firmly. "What happened?"

Drummond told him.

"Yes," said McIver. "I was afraid of this. If you hadn't convinced me yesterday that the reds were the main target, and of the political necessity for letting the boys get a bit of their own back and all the credit, I don't think I'd have agreed to act as the second line. I hope to God the Commissioner never hears of it!"

"He won't," said Drummond. "We've fixed our story, and we're sticking to it."

They were walking back up the drive, keeping pace with the alert men stretching away in a circle all round.

"Is the girl bad?"

"Cynthia? I don't know, Mac. I can't think how she got into it."

"You told her to keep out?"

"Very plainly."

"Only dull girls obey orders," said Inspector McIver. "She doesn't sound dull."

"She's not."

"Quite. For that matter, neither is Irma Peterson."

Hugh Drummond frowned at the mention of the name. The absence of some sort of outcry from anywhere about, he felt, was not a good sign. If his hopes had been justified, and her haste to get away had meant that Irma had cast caution to the winds, surely by now someone would have seen or heard her. That would mean a call for help to the officers on either side of the man who actually confronted her. And that, in turn, would be heard by himself and the Inspector. . . .

A sudden new trend in thought occurred to him. He had been in the hall: he had actually laid hands on Irma Peterson. Therefore she must have made her escape from the hall. He had assumed that she would rush from the house for safety . . . but if she did so, she could only go in three ways. Back through the big

room, through its battle . . . he smiled to himself at the thought of those grand fellows taking it out of the scum who had let them down . . . not very likely. Through the servants' quarters, which would mean that she was almost certain to bump into Algy Longworth, and he had not seen her. Through the front door, in which case Peter Darrell would have barred her way. . . . He himself had rushed through that front door, and he had not seen Darrell. He had not even heard a call from Darrell. Odd : surely Peter, seeing him in such an urgent hurry, would have called to ask if he could help ? It was possible, of course, that in his concentration on getting out to warn McIver, he had not heard him. Possible, but unlikely. Darrell's instructions, on smashing a third window to keep the gunmen moving, were to join up with Drummond and Longworth in the hall. The idea had been to cut off the butler and his satellites, keeping them away from the fisticuffs until the police arrived to collect. But Darrell had not put in an appearance. . . .

"Mac ?"

"Yes ?"

"I'm off. If any of your chaps sight Irma, let me know."

"One long blast, one short, on the whistle."

"Grand."

"But if you find her, how'll you let me know ?"

"A monumental hoot."

"I'm sorry for the local vermin," said McIver dryly.

"They must be having a terrifying night !"

He found he was talking to himself : Hugh Drummond had disappeared into the night.

Drummond made haste to the position where he had posted Peter Darrell. There was no sign of him. Of course, he might be in the house : a quick glance round showed him that the police were closing in quickly now. The sounds from the big room were abating, but the

battle was still being fought out. Drummond ran to the front door and looked into the hall.

Algy Longworth, calmly smoking a cigarette, but waving his automatic suggestively, was superintending the efforts of the chauffeur and another thug—presumably the male cook-housemaid—to carry a petrified and wounded butler down the stairs, each keeping one arm high above his head.

“Algy !”

Longworth jumped, but did not look round.

“That’s not fair, Hugh ! Don’t frighten me !”

“Algy ! Have you seen Peter ?”

“No, the louse ! He’s left all this to me. Round the back of me, please !”

Longworth addressed the last remark to a small man who burst from the main room, blood pouring from his nose, closely followed by another whom Hugh Drummond recognised as one of those he had brought with him that night.

“This is continually happening !” complained Algy Longworth. “Most handicapping ! Hi, you ! I’ll plug you through the shoulder if you don’t keep that unoccupied arm above your head.”

Hurriedly, the male cook-housemaid obeyed. Cornered, the man with the bleeding nose took a beauty on the chin, and collapsed. Proudly, his conqueror seized him by the scruff of the neck, and began to drag him in triumph towards the main room again.

“Back of me, please !” reminded Longworth. “One way traffic only, here.”

It was all that Hugh Drummond could do to drag himself away. The scene, unrepeatable, was magnificent. But he must give up the joy of watching it : perhaps by that time Peter Darrell was in urgent need of help. As he turned, he realised one thing : both Irma Peterson and Darrell must have passed through the cordon of police, for these were now closed up

and about to enter the house. He reached the porch.

"No sign?"

It was Inspector McIver at his elbow.

"None. And the odd thing is that there's no sign of Peter Darrell either."

"I've got to sort this little mob out," said McIver. "Anyone here to identify the good ones?"

"Yes, Algy."

"Right. If you want help, there's a sergeant and some fellows down where they parked their cars, in charge of the drivers. . . ."

"Thanks Mac."

Cars! That gave him an idea. Irma would make for transport, obviously. And her own car was the handiest. And it was possible, even probable, that no one had looked into the garage.

As he approached the garage, Hugh Drummond paused. The great doors were wide open, but he could see a glint here and there, as the burnished fittings of the car caught and reflected the moonlight. The more he considered the idea, the more he liked it. If Irma Peterson had had time to think—and she seemed always to have time to think—she would take this chance, the only one which offered reasonable odds. The moment she realised that the house was surrounded by police, she might retire to the concealment of the car, hoping that the cordon would close in and on, leaving her and the car outside it . . . and if she had done that, now was just about the time she'd move . . . but what had happened to Peter Darrell, if that were a correct reconstruction of her movements . . . ?

Subconsciously, as he had been thinking, Hugh Drummond veered closer to the shadows of the house. If she was in there, no point in telling her that he had guessed. He regretted that the first part of his approach from the porch had not been more circumspect, but

that couldn't be helped now. But what in heaven was Darrell doing . . . ? He wouldn't have left his post without an overwhelmingly good reason. . . .

To get at the main doors of the garage it was now necessary for Hugh Drummond to leave the shadows of the house. As he did so, a great beam of light abruptly dazzled him, and he heard the sudden roar of a powerful engine. In the same moment, he realised that the large Packard, leaping to life with headlights blazing, was being steered straight at him, viciously charging.

25: IN WHICH A GIRL IS OBSTINATE

HUGH DRUMMOND had not anticipated such a murderous attack. He had been half prepared for Irma to be in the garage, indeed he had thought it more than likely that she would make a dash for liberty in the big Packard. But he had not envisaged the possibility of her attempting to kill two birds with one stone, himself being the second.

This did not prevent him acting with his customary speed and agility. Even as he leapt aside for safety, he fired a quick shot into the bonnet of the car : he scarcely hoped to incapacitate the engine, but it was worth trying. The car came on, seemingly bounding at him, and abruptly Drummond felt his feet swept from under him. He fell against the wall of the house, and his pistol went off again as it flew out of his hand into the darkness. For a second he lay quite still, partially stunned by his fall, wondering what on earth had happened. He realised dimly that the great car had swept beside him, and was gone. He knew that he had experienced a very narrow squeak indeed, but he was not at all clear as to the manner of it.

Then, suddenly, his brain cleared, as his hand came in contact with some branches. That fallen May tree, of course ! The one with which he had smashed the window, and which was left lying by the side of the house. As he had leapt to his right for safety, his feet must have come in rude contact with the slender trunk, and this had upset his balance most efficiently. He wondered if Irma had laughed at him as she flashed by. . . .

Irma ! The last of Drummond's wits, scattered by his heavy fall, returned to him. Irma was even now tearing away down the drive, rushing to escape, and no one except himself knew that she was in the Packard ! Drummond scrambled to his feet and turned to face the drive : yes, there was the beam from her headlights just rounding the bend. . . .

A sudden mechanical roar by his side attracted his attention.

"Now then, what's all this?" demanded a gruff voice.

One of McIver's mobile squad ! What a piece of luck ! One of those police bicycles, like the one he had used to trail Irma earlier in this adventure, was just the thing he needed. It had the speed of the Packard, even as the powerful car was bound to be driven by Irma, and his little bit of practice had given him full confidence that he could manage the motor-bike at any pace. He ran towards it, and came into the light from its lamp.

"*You !*"

The exclamation halted him : he had scarcely ever heard such malevolence in a naturally pleasant voice.

"Just the fellow I've been wanting to meet !"

In a flash, Hugh Drummond realised what had happened. This officer, and this motor bicycle, were the identical combination that had halted Algy Longworth's sports car. No wonder the officer appeared a

little put out, and more than a trifle pleased at this reunion

But there was no time for explanations : with every second, Irma Peterson was establishing a longer lead. Yet the situation was funny, and—Hugh Drummond realised—was about to be funnier still. He was unable to prevent a great roar of laughter rending the night air, but he acted as he laughed.

Seizing the handlebar of the motor-bike, he gave the outraged officer a sharp push in the chest. The officer, quite out of control, staggered backwards, came in contact with the fallen May tree, and collapsed on to his back.

But Hugh Drummond did not wait to commiserate or apologise. He jumped on to the machine, and let in the clutch : and as he did so, a pair of slender arms wound themselves firmly round his waist.

“Don’t argue,” shouted a female voice, in competition with the noise of the engine. “I’ve got a grudge of my own now, so I’m coming too.”

“Cynthia !”

“Yes, it’s me. Hurry !”

Hugh Drummond did not hesitate : there was no time to. He recognised the note of obstinacy in the girl’s voice, and he could feel the strength of her grip on him. Both factors indicated that he could not rid himself of her in under minutes, and there were no minutes to spare. He accelerated sharply, and the bicycle bounded forward in response. The thought crossed his mind that she might well fall off her precarious pillion seat, at the pace he would be bound to travel. Still, there was nothing he could do about it : her voice had sounded strong, and her grip was firm, so it was fair to assume that she had recovered from whatever had happened to her. And, if she were herself again, he knew that she had the guts to carry her through. . . .

They roared to the bend in the drive. As they shot round it, they were just in time to see the rear light of the Packard turning to the left out of the gate. Drummond breathed a sigh of relief: he had been desperately afraid that Irma would reach the main road before he could be certain which way she intended to turn, and this might have thrown him off the trail almost before the chase was started. With a grim smile, he shut off his lights: the sudden darkness was instantaneously balking, but his eyes accustomed themselves to the pale light of the moon before they had travelled many yards. It would be hard work, but he could not risk a light. Up to now she would not have looked round, but once on the main road she would certainly try to discover if she were being followed. He must not gratuitously present her with the information.

He swept out of the gate. The backlight of the Packard was clearly visible. He remembered that the road, at that point, ran straight for several hundred yards. Irma was travelling fast, but she was not hurrying the Packard unduly. Hugh Drummond felt that he knew the reason: no doubt she was keeping an eye on the road behind her, for a following light. . . .

She'll get going, he told himself, the moment she's satisfied no one's after her by car. Then her only chance lies in speed. If she thinks I'm not following, she'll think that I've told McIver—no, she doesn't know he's here, but told the police, anyway—and she'll know that a description of the car will be wirelessly everywhere, and patrols sent out to intercept her. So her only chance lies in getting wherever she's going as fast as she can. Dash it, wish I'd had time to do that very thing, warn old Mac and give him a description of the car. Great Scot, Algy's still there: he may have heard my shooting over and above the hubbub; he may notice that the Packard has gone. If he does, he'll tell McIver all right . . . hope to goodness he does!

My shooting . . . Hugh Drummond smiled ruefully to himself. It would have been very much nicer still to be in possession of his automatic. To be armed was a pleasant sensation when pursuing Irma Peterson, who undoubtedly would be armed herself. But there just hadn't been time to look for his gun in the dark : Irma would have been too far away by the time he had found it.

An unseen bump on the road redoubled the grip round his waist. This girl is strong, he told himself. I wonder what happened to Cynthia? What was it she had said? Something about having a grudge of her own, now. Caused by a sharp bang on the head, perhaps, applied with the ruthless accuracy of Irma Peterson, that was the most likely explanation. I wonder if that's what happened to Peter Darrell, too : hope to goodness he's not lying in the shrubbery somewhere, unnoticed and unconscious, and perhaps badly in need of help. My goodness me, what the hell of a lot always happens when our dear pal Irma gets on the loose, frolicking her way towards escape from the fate which surely must catch up with her some time. . . .

The rear-light in front disappeared round a bend : Drummond accelerated sharply, took the bend at speed, and realised that his prognostication had been correct. The Packard in front was now definitely increasing its pace : evidently Irma was satisfied that she was not being followed, and knew that she must now rely on the rapidity at which she could travel. Hugh Drummond, accelerating with her, wondered if he dared put on a light : it was clearly adding greatly to the chances of a disastrous accident if he continued to ride only with the help of the moon. But somehow the risk seemed too great : he was confident that his presence on her tail was not suspected by Irma, and since he was unarmed, that might prove to be his only—and perhaps a decisive—advantage. The strain on his eyes

was fearful, but he set himself to take it. Of one thing Hugh Drummond was absolutely determined: Irma Peterson would not get away, this time, through any fault of his. If it were humanly possible, he would bring her to justice. Her capacity for harm was manifestly too great, and—as far as he could judge from this present exploit—increasing.

It was proving a nightmare ride. The Packard was going all out now, being superbly driven by the woman in front. Drummond wondered where she was heading for: up to now she had stuck to the main road back to London. She was going so purposefully that he had the feeling that she was making for some definite objective, perhaps only the maze of the great city where a person can contrive to remain under cover fairly easily, perhaps for some prepared line of retreat. It was in character for Irma Peterson to have prepared a line of retreat, available at any time should things go wrong . . . but this time, with him so closely on her heels, it might be possible to interfere with her plans. . . .

Hugh Drummond laughed to himself. What a shock it must have been to her when she discovered so shatteringly that he was not abed in Switzerland! And what a shock it was going to be to her when she discovered, on arrival at her destination, that she had still not contrived to shake him off! If only there had been time to pick up that gun. . . .

And what of Cynthia? Was her presence, courageous though it proved her, going to be a handicap or a help? A help, decided Hugh Drummond a trifle grimly. He had something for her to do the moment they came to a halt. Something important and useful. That was, always providing she manages to cling on to the end of the journey . . . and was not too stiff to walk fast, as soon as she did get off the bike!

A sudden warning flash of red from the car in front, as Irma evidently touched the brake and put on the

special rear-light, caused Hugh Drummond to cut out his engine on the instant. The roar of that motor-bicycle was much too loud to risk getting too near to the car in front, and he was not certain what Irma Peterson was about to do. The extra tail-light stayed on : she was slowing up rapidly and considerably, with a corresponding strain on her tyres. Abruptly, the beam from her headlights swung leftwards, and he saw that it was now illuminating a lane running between high banks with an occasional tree. The beam was moving faster again : Irma was pushing the great car up to speed again.

She knows where she's going, Hugh Drummond told himself. There was no hesitation about taking that turn off the road and down the lane ; she knew it was there all right, and she must have been looking out for it. And the way she's confidently accelerating down something which is little more than a farm track is proof positive she knows where it leads to. . . .

It was only too obvious that this lane was little more than a farm track. Hugh Drummond had turned into it now, and the powerful bicycle was not built for this sort of going : it was bucking almost as if it were a spirited mount, nervous of its surroundings. Drummond heard a little gasp in his ear, and felt an even firmer grip round his waist. He was forced to slow down a little, for he was afraid of losing control of the heavy—and now jumping—machine.

And he was faced, now, with another difficulty. Most of the lane seemed to have been cut out of the surrounding ground, or to have sunk into it. Not only was the surface most uncomfortably uneven, but the high banks, topped with some sort of hedge, effectually prevented what little moonlight there was reaching into the lane. The unpleasant result was that he was no longer able to see the surface properly over which he must pass, and the holes in the lane threatened a buckled

wheel, or at least a burst tyre, with every moment of alarming progress. To make matters worse, the gap between him and the car in front was now widening rapidly, doubly caused by its acceleration and the necessity for his added caution. . . .

Hugh Drummond made up his mind. There was only one thing to do, and he pulled up with a jerk.

"Hop it, Cynthia."

"*Hugh, look. . . .*"

Her tone of voice was urgent, and only one thing could have caused it: Drummond looked up quickly towards the car in front. That extra rear-light, the brake light, was on again. And there was now no widening of the gap between them.

"She's stopped!"

"Yes," said Hugh Drummond, "but for how long . . . ?"

An answer surprisingly came to him as they watched. Every light from the car in front abruptly went out. And as they did so, Hugh Drummond acted instinctively and turned off his engine. The sudden silence was as stunning as had been the roar of that obstreperous mount.

"She's arrived," murmured Drummond.

"Where?" whispered Cynthia in his ear.

"God knows!" Drummond grinned to himself in the darkness. "That's what you've got to find out."

"Me?"

"Yes. Off you get, Cynthia."

He heard rather a strained, soft laugh.

"If I can. . . ."

But she managed it, although with scarcely the alacrity for which he could have wished.

"All right?"

"Shall be."

"Can you run?"

"Next week."

"How about trying now . . . ?"

The girl forced herself to take a few unsteady paces. He heard her soft laugh again.

"Ouch ! Yes, near as no matter. . . ."

"Good !"

Hugh Drummond swung himself off the motor-bicycle, and pushed it well into the bank. Then he joined the girl.

"Orders, Cynthia !"

She hesitated just for a second, and he wondered if she were going to be difficult. But then he heard a quiet imitation of Algy Longworth's voice.

"Aye, aye, captain !"

"Back to the main road, find a telephone—knock up a house, if necessary—find out where we are, and ring the 'Crown.' If Algy's there, tell him. If not, leave a message with Parker, but try to get through to the big house—it must have a telephone. Tell Algy or McIver where I am, and tell 'em to rush here at once."

"Then I rejoin you ?"

"No. Make a rendezvous with them where this lane meets the main road, and all come along together. Oke ?"

"All set, blast you !" said Cynthia with unladylike vehemence.

"That way they'll make no mistake."

"Oh, yes, I concede the point. You're after her, I suppose . . . ?"

"Of course," said Hugh Drummond simply.

"Good luck, Hugh ! If you meet her, dot her one from me !"

She spoke very softly : then she was gone into the darkness. Drummond could hear her for a few seconds, as she made her way back towards the road. But he wasted no time : he also set out, in the opposite direc-

tion : there was a smile on his lips, however. Cynthia Evershed was undoubtedly made of the right stuff. . . .

Hugh Drummond did not remain in the confined space of the lane for long. He scrambled up the bank, and forced his way carefully through the hedge at the top. He found himself in a pasture field, and able again to use the pale light of the moon. And at once he realised why Irma Peterson had pulled up her car farther down the lane : he could dimly see its outline drawn up just beside a dark mass of low buildings. Quite obviously a farm, and this, no doubt, was her destination.

Using the shadows of the hedge, he began a stealthy but rapid approach to the house. And as he went, as was his habit, he assessed his chances : a farm presented almost the certainty of at least one dog. Yet he had heard no bark from the place as yet, and surely Irma Peterson could not be so well known to a canine guardian that it would not noisily enquire into her approach in the middle of the night ? Rather odd . . .

A light suddenly showed from a ground-floor window of one of the buildings, still rather a jumbled mass from his distance. Hugh Drummond did not slacken his pace, but he was watching carefully. Then something happened which made him freeze where he was, straining his eyes to see exactly what was going on. A door opened, letting out a streak of light. A form passed through into the house, but the door was not shut. Another form, or perhaps the same, left the house quickly, and disappeared into the shadows near the car. In a minute or two it returned and entered the house, obviously carrying something heavy in its arms. Then the door was shut, but the light from the ground floor window was not extinguished.

Hugh Drummond started off again, but now at an increased pace. Such goings on could not take place under the nose of any self-respecting watchdog . . .

unless one were locked up, and might now be released to fulfil its normal duty? Well, that was a chance he would have to take. And whatever her business in that farmhouse, it was obvious that Irma Peterson was still in a hurry. If an alarm for that Packard had been broadcast—and from her point of view such a happening was a certainty—then its presence empty outside the farm was a standing invitation to any passing police patrol to investigate. True, the lane had not appeared to be much used: but it was just the sort of quiet, out-of-the-way lane which would interest inquisitive authorities, bent on the discovery of the whereabouts of a fugitive car.

Irma Peterson in a hurry meant that he was in a still greater hurry. To catch that elusive lady, you had to travel about twice the speed that she was going herself. Drummond took risks in the next few minutes that he would never have taken in normal circumstances. He chanced noise, he chanced being seen, he sacrificed every precaution to reaching those farm buildings in the shortest possible space of time. And as he crouched at last by the side of the low barn which was situated next to the small cottage whence he had seen the light, he breathed a sigh of relief that in his haste he had not—so far as he could tell—advertised his presence too obviously.

Now his whole tactics changed. The last part of his journey to that lighted window was accomplished with the use of all his talents. His progress was absolutely silent, and he moved as if merged in the natural shadows. He reached the wall near the window, noted as he went that the light streaming out seemed to indicate a very thin blind or no curtain at all, and dropping on all fours, placed himself just below one corner of the window-sill. He looked up: there was a blind, of some thin material, but—if that blind fitted properly—it would be sufficient to prevent him seeing what was

going on in that room. At the most, he would only be able to see shadows. But it also prevented those inside from seeing him. . . .

He lifted his head very cautiously until his eyes were just above the level of the window-sill. As he had feared, the blind was sufficiently opaque to prevent him seeing into the room, and it fitted well enough not to provide any peep-hole into the room. There was nothing for it, then, except to get into the cottage itself.

Drummond moved swiftly to the front door. He tried it, and found it unlocked. But he did not open it at once: it was a very small cottage, and it was just possible that front door led in to the main room—the room of the window. When, from a distance, he had seen that front door opened, a shaft of light had come from the inside. It was likely, of course, that this light had merely come from an illuminated passage—there could scarcely be room for a hall—but the disturbing possibility of walking straight into the room as Irma watched, could not be ruled out altogether. . . .

No keyhole? None. If any fastening of that door were necessary it was obviously bolted from the inside. Very awkward. . . .

And no time for delay. Hugh Drummond reminded himself that as Irma was hurried, he was twice as hurried. How about the back of the house?

Keeping to the shadow of the walls, and moving as silently as ever, Drummond moved round the house and reached the back door. Close by was a large up-turned barrel, evidently used for collecting rain-water—subconsciously, Drummond noted it as providing cover should the necessity arise. Again there was no keyhole, and on trying the door he found that it was immovable. This one was bolted for the night.

He stood there for a moment, thinking. It looked as if he would have to risk that front door. A sudden,

silent entry would perhaps be the best : after all, surprise was on his side : he had no reason to suppose that Irma knew she had been followed. He was about to turn away when a scraping noise, from just in front of him, startled him.

Its meaning struck him at once. Someone was pulling back the bolts on the other side of the door.

Hugh Drummond had only a few seconds in which to conceal himself. He moved with tremendous speed to the cover of the rain-water barrel. He stooped behind it, peering round its edge towards the door, poised on his toes for instant action if necessary.

The door opened. A tall, lanky youth stepped out, revealed by the light from within the house. He was buttoning up a black leather jacket over what looked suspiciously like the top of a pyjama suit.

"Shall I come back and help you?"

Irma Peterson appeared at the door. She answered the youth imperiously, as she would have in her own character, although the tone of voice, and her whole attitude, struck the watching Drummond as rather out of keeping with the drab appearance she presented in Mrs. Benton's make-up and clothing.

"Of course! D'you think I propose to carry him . . .?"

"I'm sorry, madame. . . ."

"You talk too much!" she told him severely. "And you waste too much time! You've spent minutes dressing . . . valuable minutes. They're bound to be on my trail: I want to be off! How long will it take you?"

"No time at all now."

"It had better not!" she warned him. "Make haste!"

She turned back, and moved out of sight into the cottage. The youth hurried off, flashing a torch on to the path as he went. He passed within a yard of the

motionless Drummond, crouched like a statue behind the barrel.

Irma Peterson had stated that she would not carry *him* . . . ! Who was *him* ? Who, or what, had been the heavy weight he had seen carried into the cottage from the car ? Surely not . . . Peter Darrell ? And yet it was possible, even characteristic of Irma . . . she might well have wanted to take a hostage with her . . . !

This was no time for guesses, Hugh Drummond told himself. This was the time to find out for certain either way. And it was a golden opportunity to tackle Irma while she had no help, for it was a pretty good bet that she was now alone in the house. And she had not completely closed that back door . . . and he now knew for certain that once again she had no idea of his proximity, for her spoken fear had been only for the police net which she anticipated was being drawn ever tighter for that car.

Even as he thought, he moved. Carefully, he looked into the cottage through the slit left by the door. . . .

He was looking into a kitchen. It appeared to be empty. Drummond slipped through the door silently, his quick eye taking in everything of his new surroundings in one rapid glance. A door, half-open, led from the kitchen obviously to that other room. It looked as if he had been right, and that the front door would in fact lead straight into that front room. . . .

Moving without a sound, Drummond reached the communicating door, and dropping to his knees, peered round at floor level into the room beyond. . . .

Straddled over a chair, the limp, white-faced form of Peter Darrell was immediately opposite to him. His eyes were closed, and his head was hanging sunk into his chest. Standing with her back to him, and facing Darrell, was Irma Peterson. And as he saw her, she began to speak.

She spoke in low tones, so menacing, so cold that they would have frightened any other man. But Hugh Drummond knew all about this Irma Peterson, knew that her cruelty was truly unfathomable, that her pleasure in inflicting suffering was sadistic.

"Did I hit you too hard, Peter Darrell? Are you dying now in front of my eyes? Quite a pleasant spectacle, I assure you, since you have asked many times for death at my hands, and it does not matter to me whether you live or die. You are only one of the small fry, and so as long as our dear Hugh does not suspect that you are dead, you will serve your purpose from my point of view. But you have certainly remained unconscious a long time . . . perhaps it is as well. You are easier to move that way. And even if you die, you must be moved . . . so that Hugh does not suspect the truth and find your body. . . . I'm going to use you to bargain with, Peter Darrell . . . should I get to Switzerland after Drummond, which is quite a possibility. . . ."

Horried by the intensity of her hate—although Hugh Drummond had to admit to himself that his new manifestation should not have surprised him—he withdrew his head, rose to his feet, and was in the act of tensing his muscles for the leap which was to carry him into the room and right up to Irma before she could defend herself, when a shattering roar broke the stillness of the night outside. For a few seconds, Hugh Drummond did not realise what this could be : then he laughed to himself.

"Up to her old tricks again ! A handy aeroplane, with private pilot complete, ready to take her off at any convenient moment. And land her at any sufficiently lonely field wherever she may care to go ! Well, I've got to be quick now, or that pilot will be back to help her. . . ."

He braced himself for the effort. And even as he

did so, he realised that the luck had turned against him. He heard a little gasp from the doorway, saw a flash of metal, and found himself looking into the wrong end of a pistol held in Irma Peterson's hand.

"What a pleasant surprise! Come in, my Hugh!"

They were the soft tones of the glamorous Irma which he had so often heard before. But they also contained a command, and Hugh Drummond knew better than to disobey that command. Irma Peterson, he knew very well, was much too dexterous with that small automatic to take any undue chances. He strolled into the room, apparently unconcerned, and smiled to her.

"So near and yet so far!"

"Yes," she conceded. "But I think you've got near enough this time. . . ."

"Meaning?"

"That I haven't much time."

"What have you done to Peter, Irma?"

"If he dies, he'll be able to tell you."

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"That sounds a trifle ominous. . . .?"

But Irma Peterson did not smile.

"It was meant to be. I'm sorry, Hugh, but this is the end for you." She was speaking seriously, yet quickly: and Drummond thought he detected a note of real regret in her icy, even voice. "I had not intended that you should die this way: something more elaborate, and more painful, would appeal to me more. Still, I have been told that a bullet in the stomach is not exactly a comfortable finish. . . ."

"You are a sweetheart!" grinned Drummond.

"Keep quiet!" she spoke imperiously, and once again Drummond nearly laughed at the incongruity of her tone and her appearance as Mrs. Benton. "I'm in a hurry, and I can't tolerate your interference in my affairs any more. . . . I have already wasted too

many opportunities waiting for the right setting for you to die."

Out of the corner of his eye Hugh Drummond saw Peter Darrell move. It was a very slight movement, and, since Darrell was not in the range of vision of Irma Peterson, she could not see it too. He dared not look : any indication from him would inevitably lead her to glance towards Darrell, and if only he could gain time, Darrell might save the situation. . . .

Nothing else could, Drummond told himself ruefully. He was on the spot all right, and he knew it. For once in her life, Irma Peterson was showing a most distressing inclination to listen to her common sense, rather than to her lustful desire to stage a suitably theatrical revenge on him for the destruction of her beloved Carl Peterson . . . ye gods, was that a hope? Could he perhaps play on this hitherto over-powering lust for personal revenge, and gain time for Darrell, if he were right and Peter was really recovering his wits . . .? How he longed for the luxury even of a stolen look to see . . . but that might ruin everything. . . .

"I don't think old Carl would approve, Irma."

She snarled at him : in that moment she seemed scarcely human.

"Leave him out of it !"

Had Darrell moved again . . .?

"You can't leave old Carl out of it. He would never approve, and you know it, of a quick unexciting fatal hole in the tum-tum ! Would he ?"

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him : might risk a jump for the gun, for she seemed to be hesitating. There could be no doubt he had filled her mind with conflicting thoughts, and that would distract her . . . wish that blighted aircraft wouldn't make such a hell of a row . . . he'd have to risk a jump for the gun any moment now, or he'd be in no position to make

any jump . . . but Peter, if only it was really true that Peter was moving, would give him a better chance . . . the temptation to look was really frightful, now that out of the corner of his eye it really did seem that a figure was rising from the chair, and fumbling for something . . . oh, lord, what was he waiting for . . . ?

"Would he, now, Irma? You know darned well he wouldn't. That wasn't the way. . . ."

She seemed suddenly to scorn his words. Her lips narrowed, twisted her mouth, and drew back showing her teeth. Her eyes shone with a cruel, inhuman light. Her whole expression ceased to be that of a woman, and seemed to take on something beastly, something devilish. . . .

She laughed, a high-pitched, weird, horrifying sound. And as she did so, she lowered the muzzle of the automatic in her hand until it was pointing at Hugh Drummond's stomach.

"Here it comes, Drummond! Here's the moment I've been waiting for ever since you killed my Carl! Any moment now, and you'll be squirming on the ground shrieking for the mercy of a bullet in the head. And you're not going to get that mercy! Instead, another in your stomach, and yet another . . . until you draw your last agonised breath. Here it comes, Hugh Drummond . . . the fate that was inevitable from the moment you laid your violent, blundering hands on my own Carl. . . ."

Swaying with weakness, Peter Darrell's fumbling fingers found what he was half-consciously feeling for. He extracted the third cricket ball from his pocket, and propelled it with all his fading strength at Irma Peterson. As he released it, he fell flat on his face, out to the world again: the ball whizzed harmlessly past Irma Peterson's head, and smashed through the window.

Then things happened with incredible rapidity. Irma Peterson, her startled attention attracted to the

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window, glanced quickly towards it. In that split second, seizing his opportunity, Hugh Drummond leapt for the gun in her hand. His grip closed on it, and it went off, the bullet whining away into the darkness. He felt her arm snatched from him just as he was about to seize it : before he could steady himself to turn, Irma Peterson was running from the room. As she went, she dropped a handkerchief. . . .

And as Hugh Drummond rushed after her, a huge sheet of intense flame seemed to burst into existence between him and the door. Drummond pulled up only just in time. In the short moment that he remained stationary, the violent heat began to singe his eyebrows. He turned again, thrusting the automatic into his pocket : it was perfectly clear that the cottage would be red-hot almost at once. Picking up the fallen form of Peter Darrell, Drummond knocked out the remaining jagged pieces of glass from the window, and carried Darrell to safety. . . .

And when he got outside, he was greeted by the abrupt intensification of the aircraft engines. Irma Peterson was on her way. . . .

26: IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR BECOMES A BRICK

HUGH DRUMMOND was definitely impressed with the result of a general alarm by wireless about a fugitive car. He took the semi-unconscious Peter Darrell, in the big Packard, back to the "Crown," and twice was stopped on the way. But he managed to establish his identity with the first set of officers, and took one of their number with him as escort for the rest of the

short journey. It was a blow to have to leave Cynthia at the end of the lane, but as she had already made an assignation with Algy Longworth—and he might well miss him on the road—this became a necessity.

Arrived at the "Crown," Darrell was at once put to bed and Parker despatched for a doctor. He did not take long to come, and his report was encouraging : Darrell was suffering from severe concussion, but without complications, and he only needed rest and quiet to make a rapid recovery. As the doctor left, Longworth and Cynthia Evershed arrived at the inn, and so did Inspector McIver from his duties at the house.

McIver solemnly shook hands with Drummond.

"You've done a great thing to-night, Captain !"

Hugh Drummond grinned ruefully.

"Let Irma slip through my clutches again !"

"That was to be expected," said McIver dryly.

"The only way of stopping that girl is to shoot, hang, electrocute, behead and poison her all simultaneously. What happened ?"

Drummond told him. When he had finished, the Inspector whistled thoughtfully.

"Those handkerchiefs are an invention of the devil ! When we had the samples analysed—the ones you gave us, Captain—they shook even our experts a bit . . . made them treat them with more care and respect than I've ever seen those people treat samples with before. I believe they were scared. . . ."

"How do they work ?" asked Longworth.

"They're impregnated with something—something violent. Then, the amount of the liquid in the little bottles—when applied to the fabric and exposed to the air—controls the moment of bursting into flame, rather like a fuse. . . . And when they do flame, nothing on earth puts them out, and everything near goes up. A delightful toy . . . I can tell you our Customs people are keeping a sharp look-out for any more !"

"Good." Hugh Drummond was very serious. "Anything more I can do, Mac?"

"Over to-night's business?"

"Yes."

"No," said McIver slowly. "Not yet. As you know, the implications of this thing are enormous. All we can do is to put the facts before the Government. What action is taken must be decided at Cabinet level. That's all I can say now . . . except that you'd better remain handy in case your evidence is wanted . . . which of course it will be."

"In two or three days, yes."

"Oh?" Inspector McIver looked at Hugh Drummond shrewdly. "Taking a holiday?"

"Not exactly." Hugh Drummond lighted a cigarette. "When I overheard Irma gloating over Peter, she said rather a peculiar thing: she was going to use him to bargain with, *should I get to Switzerland before her.*"

"Nice scenery out there," commented McIver.

"You know what I'm getting at, don't you, Mac?"

"The moment she realised that you were here and not there, Mrs. Drummond is in danger."

"Precisely. And, knowing I'd tumble to that, Irma expected me to make a bee-line for Vevey."

"So you're off to bring her back . . . Mrs. Drummond, with or without Miss Peterson!"

"With, I hope," said Drummond grimly.

"She may not risk herself there . . ." suggested McIver.

"She will . . . now that she knows she's got a start on me."

"Yes," said Algy Longworth firmly. "No doubt of it. She'll be livid just now, all out for revenge, and Phyllis is the obvious tool . . . poor darling! When do we start, Hugh?"

"Not *we*, Mr. Longworth." McIver spoke with authority. "Captain Drummond, yes. . . . I won't

even try to stop him. But now that Mr. Darrell's out for a bit, you'll have to be handy for the explanations."

"Oh, lord . . . !"

"He's right, Algy!" Hugh Drummond smiled. "And you'll have to be nurse—look after Peter . . . not to mention Cynthia, here. . . ."

"Oh, ah . . . quite," said Longworth, brightening.

Hugh Drummond turned to Inspector McIver.

"Thanks, pal," he said simply. "But it isn't only a question of not stopping me . . . how do you help me to get there, starting now?"

"By getting on the telephone," laughed McIver, leaving the room quickly.

"Algy!" said Drummond. "The moment Mac's finished with the line, get through to Phyllis. Warn her and Ted. Tell 'em I'm coming, but that Irma's got a start. All set?"

"Aye, aye, skipper."

Drummond smiled to Cynthia Evershed.

"As for you," he said quietly. "You've been a great girl, and please thank your pals for the loan of the mike. But how did Irma get you?" He smiled. "Did you, by any chance, let your enthusiasm make you forget your orders?"

"Honestly, no, Hugh!" She spoke quickly. "I opened the french windows, as you told me. Irma Peterson must have been just inside: she may have been on her way to try to escape, after she heard your first hoot. The others were all behind me, of course, streaming across the lawn. As I pulled the windows open, I just caught a glimpse of her as she hit me . . . with the butt of her pistol, I think. That's all I know . . . except I've got a headache."

Drummond laughed.

"Algy'll soon put that right!"

"Rather! The heated head on soothing shoulder is a splendid method. Or the . . ."

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"Long streak of impertinence I think you were called . . . ?"

"Skip it, Cynthia !" Longworth laughed. "We'll return to the subject later. I say, Hugh, you should have seen the end !"

"What end ?"

"Of the riot scene. It was superb ! All the boys lined up their part-worn opposite numbers, and made them stand to attention while they sang 'God Save the King !' "

Inspector McIver hurried back into the room. It was the signal for Algy Longworth to disappear towards the telephone.

"There's a machine warming up at Heath Row now, Captain . . . and I've fixed the formalities by saying you're one of mine. So you are, if you bring Irma back !"

"You're a brick, Mac !"

"I rather think I am. Coming ? I'll give you a lift. . . ."

Hugh Drummond ran from the room. . . .

27 : IN WHICH THE FINAL TRICK IS PLAYED

THE man Jenner was abruptly startled out of his fuddled sleepiness when he recognised the voice on the telephone. Its bell had woken him from a pleasant dream of riches and abundance, and the curt tones, demanding his immediate presence at the house in Geneva, inferred a contrast which was doubly unwelcome at that early hour. Something had gone wrong, that was quite obvious : Madame should not have been back so soon, and there was an urgency in her bad-tempered

voice which was frankly disturbing. He got up and dressed in haste, reflecting ruefully that an interview with Madame was never over comfortable, and particularly not at around eight in the morning. What on earth could have happened? Nothing to do with that big ass Drummond, anyway: he was still confined to his bed at the hotel in Vevey, his temperature—according to reliable information—still safely over the century.

Jenner went down to his garage, and got out his car. He wished he could have waited for the cup of coffee which Mrs. Jenner was hurrying to brew for him: but that was out of the question. When Madame summoned, one did not wait for coffee.

It was light, of course, and the sun was already warm. In normal circumstances he would have enjoyed that drive over to Geneva, on such a lovely day. But there had been something in Madame's tone of voice, and her sharp words, which warned him that the coming interview would not be pleasant. Still, he hurried to it: she had ordered him to hurry. And he did not notice that another car, keeping its interval behind, hurried with him.

Jenner arrived in Geneva, and pulled up outside Madame's house. He was admitted at once, but Madame was not quite ready for him. He waited anxiously in the big ground-floor room, nervously smoking a cigarette. Now that the interview was about to take place, that tone of voice on the telephone seemed ominous: few people could frighten him, Jenner unhappily told himself, but he found this slender woman terrifying. . . .

Outside, the car which had been following had drawn up at the corner of the street. The big man turned to the eager youth who was at the wheel.

"What's at the back of these houses?" he asked shortly.

"This is very residential . . . how you say? . . . fashionable, perhaps."

HANDS OFF BULLDOG DRUMMOND !

"Yes?"

"They all have beautiful gardens . . . so beautiful!"

"No need to sell Geneva to me, son!" The big man laughed. "How do I get to the garden of *that* house?"

"This way," said the youth promptly, letting in the clutch.

A good boy, remarked the big man to himself. The manager of the hotel had certainly done well to produce him and his car so quickly, specially at such an early hour of the morning.

They made a short detour at speed.

"In there . . ." said the youth, pointing to a path. "Let me sec, the house was the third down . . . so that white fence will be the garden."

"Correct!" smiled the big man. "Wait here, pal."

"Oh, yep, okay, rather," agreed the youth.

The big man jumped lightly from the car. As he went, the youth found himself surprised: this pleasant man seemed to move quite incredibly fast while making no sound at all! And, although there was little cover, he had also most unexpectedly vanished from sight in a few paces. The youth settled down contentedly to wait: this was a huge experience, this was really in person living the films!

The garden, fenced in white, of the third house down proved child's play to the big man. The combination of the high fence and a border of flowering shrubs might have been laid out for his special benefit. In a very short time, he was comfortably concealed by the open window of a lovely room: fashionable was undoubtedly the right word for these particular houses, with a spot of luxury thrown in. . . .

He heard the voices he had come to hear. . . .

". . . so, you fools, Drummond was never here at all!"

"But, madame, I assure you. . . ."

"Silence, Jenner!" Her voice was icy. "You may explain yourself, if you can, later . . . there is no time now. I landed at the usual place, and rushed here . . . but all that took well over the hour . . . and that was over an hour ago. If Drummond has followed, it is just possible that he could reach Geneva round about now: but only if he were lucky enough to get a special plane within two hours of my departure. It is far more likely that he will arrive by ordinary means later this morning. . . ."

The crouching man outside the window allowed himself a large grin. It had certainly been a near thing, but McIver's influential resource had cut that two hours by just enough. . . .

". . . On the other hand, he will undoubtedly have telephoned to warn his wife. And we are going to take advantage of that fact."

She paused for a moment, and Jenner, watching her closely, found himself horribly fascinated by the expression on her face. Once before—when he had mentioned the name Drummond—madame's normally cold but beautiful face had been abruptly transformed into something so terrifying that it had really upset him. Now that bestially cruel expression was again in possession of her features. In spite of himself, he shuddered: this woman, he told himself, was not human. . . .

"Go to the wardrobe, Jenner."

"Yes, madame."

"You will find the uniform of the police. Dress yourself quickly, and then call me. I will do your face, and make you unrecognisable. You will then go to Mrs. Drummond and her impostor, and tell them you have been ordered, as a result of a message from Captain Drummond, to take them to a place of safety. You will then bring them here, to me. . . . They will come, for his message will have prepared them for just that sort of development. . . ."

She smiled. Jenner did not answer her smile. All he could do was to stare at her, amazed that any woman could so change on the instant. The smile held no humour, the lips seemed to be curled back in a fear-some snarl. . . .

"Hurry !"

"Of c-course, madame . . ." he stutted.

Jenner ran from the room, completely forgetting to ask how the altered circumstances affected his money. But Irma Peterson had by no means forgotten the financial side : her employers could not know yet of the collapse of their plans, and therefore were in no position to try to stop her collecting the pre-paid half in cash from her bank. How wise, Irma Peterson congratulated herself, she had been to demand that this sum should be paid before she had started on the venture. True, half was only half—curse Drummond !—but still, that half came to a very considerable sum . . . she hoped the bank would have enough ready cash in the building.

Irma Peterson looked at her watch : if she started as soon as she had worked on Jenner's make-up, the bank would be open, and she could do her business. Then, back here to wait for that silly woman, Phyllis. And after that . . . as soon as Drummond turned up, her visiting card with the mutilated body of his wife . . . a very suitable parting present ! It was a pity that the feud between them could not be finally settled on this occasion, but a very dead Phyllis would compensate her a little for this latest interference, on his part, in her plans. . . .

She heard Jenner call to her. She went quickly from the room.

Half an hour later a dapper policeman left the house. Very shortly afterwards, Irma Peterson took her car the short journey to the bank. And as she left the house, a man climbed through the garden window into

the large and beautiful downstairs room, and went straight to the telephone. . . .

He asked for a Vevey number.

"Hullo?"

"Who's that?"

"Tuesday to-day."

"Wednesday to-morrow," promptly acknowledged the big man, with a cheerful laugh. So like Ted to insist on a code! Still, no doubt he was right. There was a lot of truth in no names, no pack drill . . . and someone might be cut in on the line. Pack drill, the big man reflected, would be anything but entertaining under Irma.

"Monday lately."

"And Thursday speaking. Satisfied?"

"Go ahead."

"Tall police officer, narrow grey moustache, elderly, calling on you with message from me. Don't believe it, but obey. When he points out destination in Geneva, turn tables. Understand?"

"The old equaliser in his ribs?"

"That's the idea. My splendid chauffeur will be handy to take over, and you pop into the house if you want to see the finish."

"Goody-goody-goody."

"Up the kilts!"

"Mud in your eye."

The big man replaced the receiver. He then took a quick glance round the room. Let me see, she always has one handy somewhere very near her chair . . . that's the chair, obviously; it's got all the throne-like qualities . . . ah, in the cigarette box, perhaps . . . right first time, that's a good omen. Nasty, vicious little fellow, isn't it? Six chambers . . . out they come! The big man slipped the six rounds which he had extracted from the small revolver into his pocket. He then replaced the pistol in the cigarette box.

Three minutes later the eager youth in the car got the fright of his life. His passenger seemed to materialise out of nowhere.

"Great gracious!" he said. "My heart's stopped."

The big man grinned.

"Only stalled. Start it up again."

The youth swallowed, and nodded.

"Listen, young feller-me-lad."

"I listen."

The big man spoke slowly and distinctly for one minute. At the end, the youth—wide-eyed now—nodded. This wasn't only living a film, it was better than any film.

"Sure you understand?"

"Yep."

"No questions?"

"Nope."

"Right, me lad. Off you go!"

"Oh yep, okay, rather," agreed the youth. And the next moment he shook himself, and blinked his eyes, as his passenger, in broad daylight, literally vanished into the path.

About an hour later, Irma Peterson returned to the large, downstairs room. She was carrying a suit-case, which appeared to be so heavy that it was all that she could manage. She placed it by her special chair, and then went up to the mirror in the wall. For a few seconds she examined her reflection in the glass: then she turned away, apparently satisfied. She might well be, an observer could have remarked: Irma Peterson was certainly looking her very best. Perhaps she had taken particular care with her toilet that morning in order to remove all the traces of the drab Mrs. Benton. At any rate, the real Irma Peterson, in all her severe loveliness, now graced that room.

She flicked open the cigarette box, smiled as she looked at its contents, shut it again. Through the

stomach . . . no doubt it would be as painful a finish for a woman as she was informed that it was for a man. When he saw his wife, and the twisted pain-racked expression left on her lifeless face, perhaps Hugh Drummond would regret his latest impertinent interference. . . .

She took her long holder from a small table, placed a cigarette in it, and lighted it. She walked to the window, and looked out into the glorious garden. It seemed such a pity to have to leave all this beauty, this luxury . . . true, she would go to equal luxury, but this place held many pleasant memories for her. She frowned : all because of that interfering Hugh Drummond again ! What a lot he had cost her, throughout the years ! Really, it did seem that she would have to seek him out, quite deliberately, some day soon, and fight him to a finish . . . with the dice loaded on her side, of course. She owed it to her beloved Carl, but she owed him a suitable revenge on Drummond, something which would give that large fool all the physical and mental pain he was capable of surviving, before the final agonising curtain . . . it would take a lot of thinking out. Perhaps, now that she was temporarily unemployed again, she would have the leisure to plan the scene properly, and carefully formulate a fitting, and adequate, revenge. . . .

A slight noise came from somewhere behind her.

Irma Peterson turned back to the room quickly : she was not exactly nervy, but she was plainly a little on edge. She was longing to shake the dust of Geneva from her feet, she now realised. It was stupid to be startled by some innocent sound, which probably came from the street outside. But she could not leave without dealing with Phyllis Drummond, while she had the splendid chance . . . and that friend of Drummond's, whoever he might be, who had impersonated him. After that, she would waste no time . . . and then let clever Hugh Drummond try to find her !

She inhaled the smoke from her cigarette deeply, languidly let some of it escape again. Jenner was certainly taking his time. . . . Still, there was no reason to worry. Drummond, even if he had the luck of the devil, could scarcely have reached Geneva yet, and his first action would obviously be to make straight for the Hotel des Trois Couronnes at Vevey . . . another hour wasted in getting there, and another hour on top of that to get back, even if he knew—and he could not know—where to come back to. . . .

Somebody was whistling outside, most unmelodiously. She found herself irritated, impatiently wishing that the tuneless sound would stop. She walked over to her high-backed embroidered chair, and sat down, a little surprised at the state of her nerves. She found herself passionately longing to see Phyllis Drummond squirming, bleeding and shrieking, on the ground in front of her. What did Jenner mean by taking so much time over his simple errand? . . . for simple it was : they would come all right ; there was no fear of their refusing such a natural request, the obvious consequence of Hugh Drummond's anxiety on their behalf. When Phyllis Drummond did come, she would waste no time. A very short explanation—just to make it worse—and then the . . . the execution, that was the word ! Drat that whistling ! If whoever it was could come no nearer to any known tune, he or she had no right to inflict the dreadful noise on sensitive ears . . . somehow, the sound seemed vaguely familiar . . . whom had she heard who whistled just like that . . . ?

She extinguished the end of her cigarette. She placed another in the holder, and lighted it. She looked around her, at the lovely silk curtains, at the luxurious thick carpet, at the beautiful Louis furniture . . . all this she would have to leave behind. It was very sad : she had been happy in that room. She looked at the telephone . . . perhaps she could take the little apparatus . . . ?

It would be difficult to replace, and it might always be useful . . . ? Well, she would see when the time came : and it would come soon, now, for Jenner could not be very much longer before he ushered in the doomed guests. . . . Impatiently, she extinguished the half-smoked cigarette.

That loathsome whistling had started again, and it seemed much nearer . . . you might almost think it was coming from within the room . . . *from within the room.*

Abruptly, Irma Peterson sat upright in her chair, every nerve on the alert. And even as she reached towards the cigarette box, a recollection burst from the back of her mind to her conscious memory. Once she had heard a man whistle just like that, and it had meant the unexpected end of all her hopes. . . .

Her fingers closed on the butt of the small revolver. She sat motionless, listening. . . .

The whistling, tuneless as ever, but infuriatingly cheerful, continued.

Irma Peterson rose, and faced the large cupboard which formed the lower half of a magnificent bookcase.

"Come out !" she ordered.

"Certainly !" said a voice she knew only too well. "Delighted, Irma. Frankly, I was getting a trifle stiff in here. . . ."

The doors of the cupboard were pushed open from within, and the large form of Hugh Drummond disengaged itself. He rose to his feet, a long fat cigar in his mouth.

"Beautiful weed, this . . . found a box in there ! Did they belong to Carl ? They're quite up to his standard. . . ."

She was very pale : all the colour seemed to have fled from her face. But that was the only indication she gave of the strain through which she was passing : the pistol in her hand was pointing steadily at him.

Hugh Drummond laughed.

"Come, come, Irma ! You don't seem at all pleased to see me !"

"What's the game, Drummond ?"

She snapped out the words : Hugh Drummond laughed again.

"Why so distant ? I used to be 'Hugh,' I remember : and even 'my Hugh' at times. . . ."

"What's the game, Drummond ? Answer me . . . quick."

"Goodness, gracious, me !" smiled Hugh Drummond.

"Don't tell me we are losing our nerve ! That's not in the least like our dear old pal Irma ! But I must say it's nice to see you as your attractive self again."

The colour had returned to her face, perhaps with her rising anger.

"I mean what I say, Drummond. You'll have no chance to tell me, if you don't answer me now." She lowered the gun slightly. "I've warned you before what's coming to you. What is your game?"

"You, that's all."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You're wanted, you know . . . by a most flattering number of people."

"I see." She spoke low, her voice vibrating with passion. "I see . . . I suppose you mean that you have surrounded this house, and that I can't get away. I suppose you think that I won't shoot you now, because I'd be afraid to be found with your body : that's why you've dared show yourself here. You've made your last mistake, Hugh Drummond. If I've got to go, I'll take you with me. Do you think I could ever face Carl without having repaid the debt ? Never ! But I want to tell you one thing before you die . . . even if you have surrounded this house, I may still get away." She laughed, a high-pitched hysterical laugh. "Here it comes, Drummond ! Here, at my hand the debt is paid. . . ."

She pulled the trigger : only a sharp click resulted.

Visualising the scene precisely as it had happened, Hugh Drummond had intended to laugh at this point. He had intended to enjoy himself hugely at this moment : in fact, he had staged everything for this one purpose. This was the instant when Irma Peterson's discomfiture and realisation of the extent to which she had been outwitted, was to repay him in full for the many times she had slipped through his fingers just when he had thought the final triumph was his. But somehow, now that the time had come, he could not laugh : the much-looked-forward-to cake had lost its taste. Perhaps it was because of the expression on her face. . . .

Irma Peterson stood quite still, staring at the pistol in her hand. She seemed utterly unable to understand what had happened. With a sudden, dreadful twist of the lips, she pulled the trigger again : again only a click resulted.

With no colour left in her face she looked up at Drummond. His left hand was outstretched towards her, six rounds clearly visible in the palm. . . .

For several seconds she stood there, staring at him motionless. Then, her eyes blazing, she came back to life. In one quick movement she hurled the gun at his head. . . .

Hugh Drummond caught it in his right hand, snapped it open, fitted in the rounds, and grinned at her.

"Thanks, Irma !"

For a moment more she stared at him : then the light went out of her eyes, and all expression left her face. She might have donned a mask : a thing of beauty, but without life. . . .

"You win, Drummond !"

"I'm inclined to think I do."

"When did you get here ?"

"Very early this morning."

"How did you find this house ?"

"Jenner led me to it."

She smiled : a humourless motion of her lips, but a brave attempt.

"I never thought you could arrive so early."

"You've no idea what McIver can improvise."

"I agree." She smiled again. "That's someone else, as well as you, I seem to have under-estimated."

She was magnificent in her defeat, Hugh Drummond told himself. Not that he had really expected her to be anything else . . . still, it must take a tremendous amount of character and courage. After all, there could be no future for her now, except a short walk with pinioned arms, very early in the morning . . . metaphorically, he shook himself. Mustn't think like this about her : after all, her record was pitiless, ruthless. Still, he had to admit that she looked quite lovely. . . .

"Mind if I smoke ?"

"Not at all." But he added quickly. "No, not one of your own ! Sorry, I don't intend to come near you, but . . . catch !"

She caught the cigarette he tossed to her, dexterously placed it in her long holder.

"Got a light ?"

"You've got one on that table. . . ."

"Oh, I may move, then ?"

She was looking at him mockingly.

"That far," he answered curtly.

She walked gracefully to the table, picked up the matches, and lighted her cigarette. Then she sank into her chair.

"What happens now, my Hugh ?"

"So it's 'Hugh' again !"

"Of course. Obviously I must be nice to you."

She glanced at the pistol in his hand, as if to point her words. She smiled at him, that alluring, half-mocking smile which he could remember so well. She

was obviously, now, completely mistress of herself again : and to his annoyance, Drummond felt that she had stolen a scene which, by rights, should have been all his. And in his mind there was a growing doubt, demanding an answer : was this a role she was playing superbly, all part of a carefully prepared plan for some other devilry, or was she really so forceful a personality that she could face her complete defeat, with its inevitable consequence, in a manner which could only be described as magnificent . . . ? He realised that either possibility was on the cards.

"Well ! What happens ?"

"Any minute now, Irma, a man you may remember—old Ted Jerningham—will be brought here by your Jenner, most conveniently for me."

"So it was Jerningham !"

"Yes. Jenner will have a nasty surprise when he arrives. I believe the Swiss police take a poor view of anyone who impersonates them, so he'll have a lot of explaining to do."

She laughed.

"Poor Jenner !" Her smile suddenly froze, and she spoke, for a moment, venomously. "But he deserves everything that happens to him !"

"For once," said Drummond, "we agree."

"And then . . . ?"

"You can take your choice. I'd rather you consented to come back and face McIver in England : I've got a comfortable plane waiting. But if you prefer this place, I'll hand you over here."

"I see." She half-closed her eyes, looked at him speculatively. She spoke slowly, rather caressingly. "That means that a very great brain—forgive my apparent conceit—housed in a most attractive head, and placed on a body which has been much admired, will all be destroyed. . . ."

"Yes," said Drummond brutally. "It does."

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"Rather a pity, don't you think? When we could arrange, surely, some satisfactory alternative . . . physical, financial? Yours is the whip hand now, it is for you to choose. And whatever else you may say of me, Hugh Drummond, you know I keep my word."

She leant forward a little, her lips slightly parted, a faint smile on her face.

"Don't be an ass, Irma !"

"But how rude !" she laughed. "Still, that great boor Hugh never really possessed party manners, did he? So I must be ready to make excuses. . . . Hugh, what do you want?"

Hugh Drummond felt that the conversation was getting well out of hand : why the hell didn't Ted turn up? But, although Irma was making him feel thoroughly uncomfortable, he kept himself very much on the alert for any sudden movement. After all, she could do nothing with words alone. . . .

"Stow it, Irma. You know you're wasting your time."

"Do I?"

"Yes," said Drummond emphatically.

She laughed harshly, abruptly.

"Let me have my fun ! I may not have much time left."

Hugh Drummond looked at her searchingly.

"Strangely enough, I do know you'd keep your word . . . under the influence of a loaded gun ! Which is it to be? London or . . . here?"

"Neither," she smiled.

"It'll be one or the other." He spoke grimly.

"That's as may be. But you'll have to compel me . . . and I won't make myself easy."

She laughed. And as she did so, the telephone bell rang.

Irma Peterson made a forward movement towards the desk on which the instrument was placed.

"Stay still !" ordered Drummond. "One of your

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pals, eh? Well, I'll ask him or her round: we might as well rope in as many as possible. . . ."

"Oh, *no*. . . ."

It was a plaintive cry, but Hugh Drummond hardened his soft heart. The more of Irma Peterson's cronies he could collect, the cleaner the world would become, he told himself firmly. Keeping the pistol pointed unswervingly at the woman in the chair, he lifted the receiver with his left hand. . . .

"Hullo . . . ?"

All his breath was taken from him on the instant, leaving him choking. A burning, searing pain caused water to rush to his eyes, blinding him. He dropped the instrument, and staggered after the figure he had just had time to glimpse dashing wildly from the room. . . . He hit a chair and fell heavily.

* * * * *

Inspector McIver met the aircraft which brought the Drummonds and Jerningham back to England.

"No Irma?" he laughed.

"She declined the invitation," Hugh Drummond told him with a smile. "But I've brought you a lovely toy instead, Mac!"

"Really?"

"Yes. You fix it inside your telephone. Then you wire it to two switches at some convenient place, possibly under the carpet by a comfortable chair. If you step on one switch, the telephone rings. Then, when your victim answers it, you step on the other, and he collects a nice whiff of tear gas. It's all the rage at parties in Geneva."

"Quite," said McIver.

He drew his big friend aside.

"Excuse, please, and all that, Captain. . . ." he smiled. "But I think I should take extra care for quite a long time if I were you. . . ."

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"Oh?" grinned Drummond. "Why?"

"That there Irma," said the Inspector. "I have a distinct feeling that she'll want her own back on all this. And when she decides it's the right moment, there'll be no holds barred, no Queensberry rules, no nothing except attempted murder. . . ."

"Attempted is the operative word," laughed Hugh Drummond gaily. "I say, Mac . . . where's the nearest beer?"

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